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# EXCITING WESTERN

VOL. 8, No. 2 **EVERY STORY BRAND NEW** OCTOBER, 1944

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A Novel of Today's West
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**Victim of a Robbery Frame, Paroled Prisoner Tex Colton Returns to His Home Range to Right a Great Wrong by Tackling a Murderous Gang in Grim Lone-Handed Combat!** ..... **13**

*Two Complete Novelets*

**LAW IN HIS BLOOD**.....**T. W. Ford** **34**
When Lynch-Law Rules, Ben Trace Faces Thundering Irons to Side an Accused Pard!

**BOOTHILL BELLER BOX**.....**Jackson Cole** **49**
Arizona Ranger Navajo Raine Battles to Help Wayne Morgan, a Fellow Fighter for Justice!

*Exciting Short Stories*

**GUNNED FROM THE GRAVE**..**Ralph J. Smith** **45**
Vengeance Reaches Out for a Killer.

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Buck Brenner Defends an Accused Horse.

*AND*

**TRAIL BLAZERS** .....**Captain Ranger** **6**
A Meaty Department Devoted to the Outdoors.

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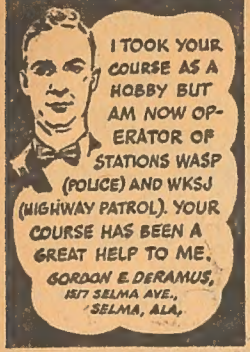
I TOOK YOUR COURSE AS A HOBBY BUT AM NOW OPERATOR OF STATIONS WASP (POLICE) AND WKSJ (HIGHWAY PATROL). YOUR COURSE HAS BEEN A GREAT HELP TO ME.
GORDON E. DERAMUS, 1817 SELMA AVE., SELMA, ALA.

I AM A RADIO OPERATOR AND AIRCRAFT ELECTRICIAN FOR AN AIRCRAFT MANUFACTURER. THE SMALL SUM I INVESTED IN THE N.R.I. COURSE HAS PAID DIVIDENDS COUNTLESS TIMES.
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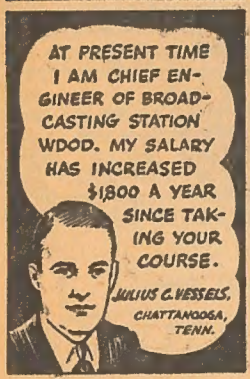
# Know Radio

## *Be a Success Like these Men*


AT PRESENT TIME I AM CHIEF ENGINEER OF BROADCASTING STATION WDOD. MY SALARY HAS INCREASED $1800 A YEAR SINCE TAKING YOUR COURSE.
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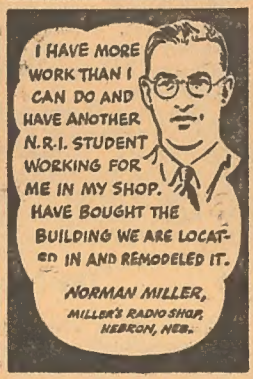
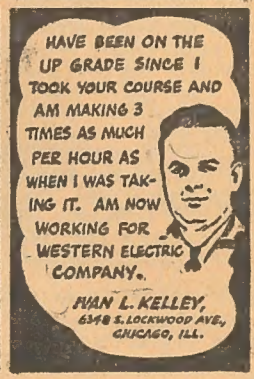

I HAVE MORE WORK THAN I CAN DO AND HAVE ANOTHER N.R.I. STUDENT WORKING FOR ME IN MY SHOP. HAVE BOUGHT THE BUILDING WE ARE LOCATED IN AND REMODELED IT.
NORMAN MILLER, MILLER'S RADIO SHOP, HEBRON, NEB.


HAVE BEEN ON THE UP GRADE SINCE I TOOK YOUR COURSE AND AM MAKING 3 TIMES AS MUCH PER HOUR AS WHEN I WAS TAKING IT. AM NOW WORKING FOR WESTERN ELECTRIC COMPANY.
IVAN L. KELLEY, 6348 S. LOCKWOOD AVE., CHICAGO, ILL.

I AM STILL ATTENDING SCHOOL AND DO SPARE TIME WORK IN MY RADIO SHOP AT HOME. I EARNED ABOUT $427 IN SPARE TIME WHILE TAKING YOUR COURSE.
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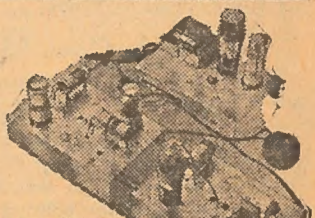

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*A Department for Readers Conducted by CAPTAIN RANGER*

FOLKS, let's get Arizona straight. It's a young State, the youngest of the forty-eight. Admitted to the Union in 1912 Arizona is a lusty, up and coming baby fast forging ahead to its important position among the galaxay of glamorous, sun-drenched Western States. Watch it ramble when post-war planning on the part of a lot of Western-minded hombres becomes peace-time doing. The day when dreams come true.

Arizona is a big State. Fifth largest in the country. Four hundred miles long and about three hundred miles wide on the average. It's a colorful land of cactus and contrasts, of mile high jagged-peaked mountains and tremendous stretches of forbidding, parched desert sands.

Yet, by way of surprise, within Arizona's boundaries in the north central portion of the State is one of the world's largest stands of pine forest. Big scale lumbering is an important Arizona industry.

## Wide Open Spaces

There are wide open spaces in Arizona, and plenty of them. They are traditional. In Arizona you can live in settlements that vary from Indian trading posts to modern cities like Phoenix and Tucson. You can still find typical cowtowns with weather-beaten, false front frame buildings, mining towns humming with the industry of big business as the great copper companies get out copper and other industrial ores the country needs in war and for peace time goods as well.

You can find ghost towns in Arizona grimly hanging on for another re-birth and breathing the potent memory of their past glory as bustling, brawling, helldorado boom time mining camps. Or you can find typical farm villages nestling in the Arizona sun.

## Food Products

Arizona's vast desert is not all empty sage and sand. Part of it ships out some $30,000,000 worth of fruit and vegetables, dairy products and livestock to the rest of the country *each year.* That's a lot of important food to add to our country's bread-basket.

In normal times it means winter lettuce, 10,000 carloads of it, and cantaloups, and grapefruit as well as other garden truck sent out to the Nation's stores.

In wartime, when every bit of food must count for the men in the armed services who come first, and for the lend-lease supplies needed by our Allies, Arizona's farmlands are an essential cog in the country's food supply machinery.

Arizona's desert soil, where water has been or can be supplied by irrigation, is one of the Southwest's richest winter garden spots. Food can be grown there when other less favored portions of the country are blanketed in winter snow and the ground gripped tight in penetrating frost.

## The Desert Area

Whereat is this desert that blooms in the winter as well as the rest of the year? Much of it lies in Maricopa county just about dead center in the State, the Salt River Valley. Phoenix, capital of Arizona, is likewise the hub of this amazing desert farming area.

Most of the water for the Salt River irrigation project comes from Roosevelt Lake and Roosevelt Dam high up in the mountains along the old Apache Trail eighty miles from Phoenix.

Incidentally this was one of the first large scale irrigation projects ever undertaken by the U. S. Bureau of Reclamation. From a dollars and cents viewpoint its cost has been repaid many times in the value of the farm produce it enabled farmers in the Salt River Valley to produce.

Water backed up by the dam forms a twenty-five mile long lake. Controlled release of this reservoir of life-giving moisture to the farm lands further down the valley makes farming twelve months a year possible on what would otherwise be barren desert soil.

Nearly a half million acres of farm enterprise can be watered from the dam. Down in the Salt River Valley itself canals covering 1,350 miles carry the water that makes the desert fertile.

That's one side of Arizona. Irrigated desert farming.

And how about the climate? Don't cheer too soon. By no means is all of Arizona a

*(Continued on page 10)*

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# I CAN MAKE YOU COMMANDO -TOUGH

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Pockets are good places to hold keys . . . and loose change for carfare and newspapers.

But pockets are no place for *any* kind of money except actual expense money these days.

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Bonds buy bullets for soldiers.

Bonds buy security for your old age.

Bonds buy education for your kids.

Bonds buy things you'll need later—that you can't buy now.

Bonds buy peace of mind—knowing that your money is in the fight.

Reach into the pocket I invented. Take out all that extra cash. Invest it in interest-bearing War Bonds.

You'll make me very happy if you do.

You'll be happy too.

## WAR BONDS to Have and to Hold

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*This is an official U. S. Treasury advertisement—prepared under auspices of Treasury Department and War Advertising Council*

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Send me free under plain seal and wrapper booklet "NEWLY PATENTED RUPTURE CARE." No obligation to buy.
Name .....
Address .....


## TRAIL BLAZERS

*(Continued from page 6)*

summer climate playground in mid-winter. June in January is strictly localized. A lot depends on altitude.

Up in the high, snow-capped mountains around Flagstaff in the northern part of the State for instance, winter sports such as skiing and so forth are regularly conducted each year in the Arizona Snow Bowl.

On the other hand Phoenix has a monthly average low temperature of about 50 degrees in January. Which certainly isn't hard to take. Phoenix's summer high temperatures run about 90 degrees in July.

Down on the desert in the southern part of the State, or along the Colorado River Valley in Yuma and Mojave counties, almost every summer there'll be a few days when the mercury in the thermometer bubbles up around the 110 to 115 mark. It doesn't actually boil out the top, but it comes close to it. Even to a person accustomed to desert heat, 115 is hot, plenty hot.

Winter at Yuma may afford a few chilly nights. Generally a light frost or two between Christmas and the middle of January. But before and after that clear sailing as far as freezing temperatures are concerned.

It is a far different story in the mountain country around Flagstaff, or Prescott. The thermometer has dropped to thirty below zero at Flagstaff and a killing frost can be expected any time between about the first of October and the first of June.

Prescott is not quite so rough, but the twenty below zero winter lows are rugged enough for anyone. Then too there may be as much as 100 inches of snowfall in the high mountain altitudes during the winter months. That's about eight feet of snow.

Added up, it means for a mild winter climate stick to the low elevations and the desert country in the southern half of the State.

### Sunshine Galore

But wherever you go in Arizona you will very soon be aware of one of the State's greatest assets—sunshine. In some parts of the southern section the average number of clear days a year is 280. Phoenix has about 235 clear days a year.

And because generally speaking the relative humidity is very low throughout Arizona, the high summer temperatures are nothing like as oppressive as similar temperatures would be in a more humid part of the country. You've heard the expression, "It's not the heat; it's the humidity."

It's true. In Arizona it works.

### A Land of Many Mines

Mining, of course, is one of Arizona's most important resources. Big and little mines abound. There are huge companies that mine the giant copper deposits, the lead and zinc mines, tungsten mines and in normal times the established gold and silver properties. There are smaller outfits doing the same thing. And when gold mining was unrestricted by wartime Government order a host

*(Continued on page 76)*

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Tex's first bullet smashed into the carbine

# GUN THUNDER IN BROKEN BOW

## By W. C. TUTTLE

*Victim of a Robbery Frame, Paroled Prisoner Tex Colton Returns to His Home Range to Right a Great Wrong by Tackling a Murderous Gang in Grim Lone-Handed Combat!*

### CHAPTER I

*Home on Parole*

TEX COLTON came riding down through the Burnt Fork country, the smell of sheep in his nostrils, a film of sheepland dust all over both him and his sorrel. Slim was six feet, three inches tall, with the shoulders of a heavyweight fighter and the waist of a lightweight. His face was long, rather bony, his nose well-shaped, his mouth wide, and his eyes the gray of a rainy sky.

Burnt Fork was a sheep country—and looked it. The long slopes of the once-green hills were mere dust-heaps now. Even the sagebrush was cropped to the roots. It had been a dry season, too, and the leaves on the cottonwoods whispered like paper foliage in a vagrant breeze. The dust was six inches deep on the trails, and the horse traveled noiselessly.

At a bend on the narrow swale was the typical tent of a sheepherder, patched with innumerable colors, a small stove-pipe sticking crazily through the top. Smoke was drifting lazily from the pipe, indicating that

the herder was getting a meal for himself. Tex Colton drew up near the front of the small tent. Leaning against one of the guy-ropes was a Winchester carbine.

Tex's shadow fell across the tent, and the herder, whiskered and unkempt, thrust his head outside. For a moment he stared at Tex, and his hand streaked for the carbine. Tex's first bullet smashed into the loading-gate of the carbine, and, with a howl of pain, the herder let the gun get away from him. Then he lifted his hands and came outside.

"All right, all right," he panted. "But I still think yuh're a dirty coward and I—huh!"

He shut his lips tightly and stared at Tex, who grinned lazily.

"What are you talkin' about, Mister?" he asked curiously.

"Nothin'," replied the herder.

The two men looked each other over carefully. Tex slid cautiously out of his saddle.

"Yore name ain't Colton, is it?" the man said.

"Yeah," admitted the rider. "Tex Colton. Why?"

"Oh, nothin'."

Tex inspected the carbine and found it useless for the moment.

"Good shootin'," remarked the herder.

"No," denied Tex. "I missed yore hand. I'm kind of out of practice. How about somethin' to eat?"

"Yeah—sure. I was fixin' to eat, anyway."

Tex squatted in the doorway of the tent and watched the herder heat a pot of pink beans and chili, pop a pan of biscuits into the oven of the little, sheet-iron stove, and stir up the water in the coffee-pot.

"Git tired of my own cookin'," said the herder. "Glad to have company."

"Yeah—I noticed that. Yuh wanted me permanently, seems like."

"A feller can make mistakes," growled the herder.

IDLY Tex noticed that the man's knuckles were skinned, and he also had some skin off his left cheek, as though struck a glancing blow.

"How far is it to Curlew?" asked Tex.

"Less'n ten miles. You headin' for Broken Bow Valley?"

"Might be. Headin' for Curlew now."

"I was down there last night. Got drunk and had a fight. Most allus do—on payday. Mostly allus get licked, too."

"Didn't get licked last night, eh?"

"Nope. Well, I reckon them biscuits are done. Grab a plate and dive into the beans. Use canned-cow with yore coffee? I ain't got much of an appetite today."

They finished the meal, and Tex rode on, wondering just why that herder wanted to shoot him, and why he said he still thought Tex was a dirty coward. Tex had never seen the man in his life. In fact, Tex had only been paroled from prison three months ago, after three years in prison, and none of those three months had been spent within many miles of Burnt Fork.

Three years ago Tex Colton had been convicted of a big train robbery, in which the express messenger and the guard had been wounded, and gold coin and currency, estimated close to thirty thousand dollars had been taken. A description given by the wounded messenger and the engineer of the train fitted Tex, in spite of the mask. A heavy, seal ring, worn on his left hand, positively identified Tex, although he did not have the ring, when arrested. Tex was sentenced to fifteen years, but the loot was never recovered.

Tex had been a model prisoner, in spite of the fact that he had been a wild-riding cowboy, with little regard for the law. Not being in any position to get inside information, Tex didn't know that three of the real badmen of the prison had planned a big break, but when it did break, Tex flung himself into the battle to save the life of the warden who had treated him fairly, and routed the convicts. Several were wounded, but Tex escaped injury. Within two weeks he was paroled, and went away with the thanks and blessings of the warden.

Tex was certain that the express company had been notified, and that they would have men watching, waiting for him to dig up that money. But he took a job in the city, where he amassed enough to buy other clothes, a horse, saddle and a serviceable gun. Then he headed for Broken Bow Valley.

No one had written him during those three years. His brother, only a year younger, was there. Tex had turned his little ranch over to "Chuck," when he went to prison, and Chuck promised to keep things going. Tex did not have any exalted ideas of Chuck.

There was a girl, too, Sally Reed. They were not engaged, but Tex felt that it was understood. Sally never wrote him. After all, why should she? The law had branded him. Her father, Toby Reed, had been Tex's best friend. And there was Aunt Emmeline, with her temperance warnings. They were a great pair.

And there was "Old Tuck" Ames, and his Lazy A spread. And "Miracle" Jones, who worked for Tuck Ames. He wondered if they were still alive. But as he rode along, thinking of those folks down in Broken Bow, his heart skipped a beat. He suddenly realized that they would not be any too well pleased to see a man who just came from prison. Those old friendships were gone now. He wondered what Nate Peterson, the sheriff, would say. And "Dude" McFee, the deputy. Dude was all right—just dumb.

Hearing the rapid beat of hoofs the man let Tex fall back

Tex remembered that there were tears in Dude's eyes, when he turned his prisoner over to the warden.

Curlew was on the railroad, an outfitting point for both cattle and sheep, and at the entrance to Broken Bow Valley, where a stage line made a round-trip every twenty-four hours. Tex stayed there that night, but did not see any folks from Broken Bow. He did run into a man who called him "Chuck." Tex questioned the man, who turned out to be the owner of the hotel. Tex had never met him before.

"Well, I don't know Chuck very well, but I'd have sworn you was him," the man said. "You're his brother, eh? I didn't know he had a brother. Why, I saw Chuck last night."

"He was here in Curlew last night?" asked Tex curiously.

"Yes, he was. He had a—well, I heard he got into a fist-fight over in the Omega Saloon."

"And got whipped, eh?" queried Tex.

"Well, yes—I heard he did."

"And by a sheep-herder, too," said Tex, a trifle bitterly.

"I—I don't know about that. The sheep men do come here, you know. Well, I am glad to have met you, Mr. Colton."

Tex tried to start a conversation with the bartender at the Omega, but the man wasn't inclined to talk much.

"I don't know how yuh done it—but you got patched up awful quick," he said at last.

It was very evident that he, also, mistook Tex for his brother. They did look a lot alike, but Tex was sure he had aged more than Chuck would. Still, Chuck was a wild kid, too fond of liquor and cards, not to mention women. Tex wondered what Chuck would do about the ranch. It really belonged to Tex.

"You take it over and run it," he had said to Chuck. "In fifteen years I probably won't care about cattle." But there had been no legal transfer. Maybe Chuck had built up a good-sized herd by this time. Maybe they could run it together. It would be good to see the old hills again. . . .

NATE PETERSON, sheriff of Broken Bow, was a novelist's type of Western peace officer. He was well over six feet tall, loose-jointed, with a long, narrow face, prominent nose and cheekbones, a wide gash of a mouth, surmounted by a piratical-looking mustache. He had bony shoulder-blades and sharp elbows, which threatened at any moment to saw right through his thin, faded shirt, and his hips were so narrow that he had difficulty in keeping his gun-belt in place. He was also just a trifle bow-legged, and ran his boot heels over on the outside edges.

"Dude" McKee, the deputy, was a fitting foil for the tall sheriff. Dude was five feet, six inches in height, and almost that much in circumference. He had a round, moon-like face, round eyes, a button-like nose, and his lower jaw had a natural sag, which gave him a surprised appearance most of the time. Dude was Nate's brother-in-law.

Nate said that Dude had been a normal-looking person, until he proposed to Emmeline Peterson. Her acceptance shocked him, and he never recovered. So Nate, in order to help in her support, appointed Dude as deputy. Dude denied this. He said he took the job at the insistence of Emmeline, in order to keep Nate from making a fool of himself.

They knew nothing about Tex Colton being paroled. Both of them were sitting on the office porch, when Tex rode up in front of the place. Dude was tilted perilously back in an old chair, and when he realized that this tall, hard-faced cowboy wasn't Chuck Colton, he made one struggle, which caused the chair legs to skid from under him, and he came down on the back of his head with a resounding crash.

"Aw, quit yore foolin'," said the sheriff. But Dude wasn't fooling. He hammered his heels on the porch, and made funny noises with his lips.

"Hyah, Nate," said Tex. "Yore fool-hen fell off his perch."

"I ain't goin' to resent that," replied the sheriff. "Tex whereabouts did you come from?"

Tex took his parole papers from his pocket, and the sheriff perused them, using trombone tactics, because he didn't have his reading glasses handy. Dude recovered and sat up, rubbing the back of his head, a more-than-usual dazed expression on his face.

"It's all right to knock wood," said Tex dryly, "but yuh don't need to do it with yore head, Dude."

"Oh, m' gosh!" exclaimed the deputy. "Tex Colton!"

"Paroled, eh?" remarked the sheriff. "Well, well!"

"He's what?" asked Dude.

"He's pay-rolled!" snorted the sheriff.

"Oh," said Dude, who didn't know any more than he did before. However, he got to his feet and shook hands awkwardly with Tex.

"I've knowed fellers to miss one day," he said, "but cuss it, I've done missed twelve years. Never even felt 'em goin' past. Huh!"

"Listen, Knot-Head," said the sheriff. "Tex only served three years, and they let him loose."

"Oh, I—yea-a-ah? Fine! How are yuh, Tex?"

"Just as fine as frog-hair, Dude." Tex drew a deep breath and looked around.

"Everything looks natural in Eagle City. I kind of wondered how it would be. Yuh see, nobody ever wrote me."

"Yuh mean—nobody wrote yuh any letters?" asked the sheriff.

Tex shook his head.

"Not a letter, Nate. It's a long time—not hearin' from home."

"Three years—and you ain't heard—nothin'," said the sheriff quietly. "It's shore funny. They didn't write you—nothin', Tex?"

"Didn't they tell yuh about Chuck and Sally Reed?" asked Dude.

Tex looked keenly at the deputy for several moments.

"What about Sally and Chuck?" he asked.

"Hang it, they got married over a year ago!"

"Sally and Chuck—got married," said Tex, as though merely stating a fact. "They—wait a minute—"

"That's right, Tex," said the sheriff.

"Well!" Tex tried to smile, but it was only a grimace. "Well, I—yuh see, I didn't know that. Nobody ever told me. Over a year ago. How are they?"

"What could yuh expect?" asked the sheriff a bit savagely. "I don't care if Chuck is yore brother—he's no blamed good. Never was no good. Drunken, shiftless, gamblin' fool."

The lines on Tex's face deepened. "How is Sally?" he asked huskily.

The sheriff shrugged. "Tied to a no-good—well, what can yuh expect?"

"She isn't happy, Nate?"

"Shucks, I don't know. Women are funny. Some of 'em yuh can beat up, and—"

"He didn't beat her, did he, Nate?"

"Better keep off'n the thin ice, Nate," advised Dude. "We ain't never seen him beat her."

"No, we ain't," agreed the sheriff. "What are yuh aimin' to do down here, Tex?"

"I don't know. There ain't much for me to do, I reckon. They'll all think I came back to dig up that money."

"Didn't yuh?" asked Dude.

"Maybe," replied Tex shortly.

"There's Chuck now," said the sheriff.

A MAN was dismounting at the saloon hitch-rack across the street. From that distance he looked very much like Tex, same height, same general build. He went into the saloon.

"Spends most of his time at the War Bonnet Saloon," said Dude.

"Is Abe Harris still runnin' it?" asked Tex.

"No—Abe sold out eight, nine months ago to a feller named Slim Burnett. I reckon Chuck's credit is pretty good over there."

"I came down through Burnt Fork," said Tex. "That country is plumb sheeped out."

"That's what I hear," nodded the sheriff. "Folks around here are kind of worried—about sheep. Blake Van Leuven, the sheep king, has got to have some grass pretty quick, or lose his herds. The wool market ain't been good, and the lamb market is awful low. Van Leuven is smart, and yuh can't tell what he'll do. The law won't give the cowman the best of it, and if he ever gets his woolies into Broken Bow—all creation can't save the valley."

Tex knew this was a fact. The acres owned by the cattlemen were limited to a few hundred, usually fenced. The rest of it was open range, controlled by custom by each spread.

Force of arms was the only recourse, but so long as the sheepmen did not own any property, they would be handicapped in making any sort of a start.

"They can't come in on the road," said Dude, "and yore place blocks 'em from comin' in on the east side of the canyon."

"That fence I put between the cliff and the rim of the canyon," said Tex. "I put it in to keep my own stock from leavin' the valley, but I can see where it blocks the sheep from that direction."

"Van Leuven wouldn't let a fence stop him," said the sheriff, "but he'd have to drive his sheep square across yore land. The law prevents that."

"Law," said Dude, "is worth nothin', after they're across."

"That's right," agreed Tex. "Well, I'll kinda look around the town."

"Glad yo're back, Tex," said the sheriff.

## CHAPTER II

### *Vain Sacrifice*

SLOWLY Tex walked up the street to the general store, where he stopped in front. Chuck was coming across the street to the store, but hadn't noticed Tex yet. It was easy to see why the two men in Curlew had mistaken Tex for Chuck. As he came up to the sidewalk Chuck lifted his head and saw Tex. He stopped short in amazement.

"Hyah, Kid," Tex said.

Chuck had a discolored eye, and a swollen cheekbone.

"Hyah, Tex," he said. "Where'd you come from?"

He came up on the sidewalk, but did not offer to shake hands with Tex.

"You wouldn't need many guesses where I came from, Chuck."

"No—that's right. How long yuh been out?"

"Three months. How's everythin' at the ranch?"

Chuck's eyes clouded. "All right," he said. "You—you ain't aimin' to stay in the valley, are yuh?"

"Why not? I haven't forgotten how to handle cows."

"No, I don't reckon so. But who'll give yuh a job?"

Tex smiled. "Nobody, I don't suppose. But what about my own place?"

"Yore place?" grunted Chuck. "What do yuh mean by that? You gave me that ranch, and yuh know yuh did. You can't take it back."

"Show me the deed to it, Chuck."

"Don't start anythin' like that," warned Chuck. "Everybody knows yuh gave me that ranch and the cattle. You can't come back here and start trouble with me. I don't know how yuh got out—and I don't care—but I know you ain't got no rights to that ranch."

Tex's lips smiled, but his eyes were hard.

"I told you to take it and run it, Chuck," he said. "I said I prob'ly wouldn't care anythin' about it, after fifteen years. Well, it's only three, and you seem to have spent that three years in raisin' cain—even to fightin' with sheepherders."

Chuck's face flamed and his clenched right hand swayed back toward the butt of his holstered gun.

"Keep cool, Chuck," Tex said. "You know danged well that I can gun yuh down or slap yuh down at any turn of the road. We're brothers, but if you ever make a break at me, I'll forget everything."

"Yuh would, eh? Yeah, yuh would. But, dang it all, I defy yuh to take back that ranch. It's mine, and you'll take it—over my dead body."

"Prob'ly," said Tex dryly. "I didn't come back here to fool around."

"You better not, or you'll—"

"I'll what?"

Put squarely up to him, Chuck didn't know.

"Go dig up the money yuh hid and go away," Chuck finally said. "Broken Bow folks don't need yuh around here."

"And that," said Tex grimly, "is somethin' else we've got to talk about. But not here."

"What have I got to do with that money?" demanded Chuck.

"Innocent angel," said Tex bitterly. "I served three years of a fifteen year sentence—for you, blast yuh! And what thanks do I get?"

"For—for me?" whispered Chuck. "You served—for me?"

"They recognized me, didn't they? Who looked like me? And who was wearin' that ring? You always wanted to wear it—so yuh swiped it. Keep yore hand away from that gun! I'm not tellin' anybody—except you. I didn't tell at the trial, and I'm not tellin' now—unless yuh make me."

Chuck swallowed painfully, started to say something, but changed his mind.

"All right," he said huskily, and walked into the store.

Tex went down to the little hotel to get a room. Old Tom Hefner was still running the place, a little, tubby, white-haired man. Tex told him he wanted a room. Hefner said:

"Oh, sure—a room. I hope everythin' is all right at home, Chuck."

He dug up the old, dog-eared register, and Tex wrote his name. The old man glanced at the register, started to put it under the counter, but took another look. It was "Tex Colton." The old man gasped and squinted at Tex.

"How, in the name of By Jimminy, did you get here?" he asked. "Tex Colton! You—you ain't funnin', are yuh? I thought you was Chuck!"

"I'm Tex all right, Mr. Hefner. They turned me out on parole. Yuh won't mind lettin' me sleep here, will yuh?"

"Hell's Bells—no! Welcome back to Eagle City, Tex!"

"Much obliged, Mr. Hefner. You are the first one to welcome me—and I shore appreciate it."

"That's all right, Tex. Ain't none of us perfect. Seen Chuck yet?"

"Yeah."

"Yuh know," remarked the old man, as he piloted Tex up the narrow stairs, "I was talkin' about you only the other day with Toby Reed. We was wonderin' why nobody ever heard from yuh."

"Yuh see," said Tex, "nobody ever wrote to me."

"Didn't, huh? Here's yore room. That's funny."

"What's funny?" asked Tex curiously.

"You not hearin' from anybody. Huh! Don't understand it. Toby said that Sally wrote yuh a lot of letters, but yuh didn't answer. Just before Sally got married, Toby wrote yuh a long letter—and never got an answer."

TEX walked over and stared through the window, which looked out on the main street of Eagle City. Tom Hefner stood beside the doorway, watching him. He added to his former statement:

"And Chuck said yuh never answered his letters either. Yuh say they let yuh out on parole? What does that mean—just a short time, Tex?"

Tex didn't turn away from his grim study of the street, but he replied: "Long enough to kill me a few skunks, I reckon."

"Uh-huh," grunted the old man, and went pattering down the stairs, shaking his head.

Tex saw Chuck leave the store and start over toward the hitch-rack, but turned and came back to exchange a few words with Dude McKee, the deputy sheriff. Dude was telling Chuck that Tex was back, but Chuck knew it. Dude nodded and went on toward the War Bonnet Saloon, while Chuck went to the rack to get his horse. He was in bad humor, judging from the way he yanked at the tie-rope. The horse jerked back, but Chuck whirled the animal around, kicked it in the ribs, leaped into the saddle and went out of town, his spur-rowels raking deep into the horse's shoulders.

"A man that'll do that," muttered Tex, "would strike a woman. . . ."

Chuck Colton lost no time in getting back to his ranch at the north end of the valley, about ten miles from Eagle City. The sprawling, old buildings were on a small mesa, and almost against some tall cliffs. Only a short distance from the buildings was the mouth of Hangman Canyon, while on the other side of the canyon was the road between Curlew and Eagle City.

Back of the stable, where the cliffs seemed to reach for the sky, a fence had been built from the bottom of the cliffs to the rim of the canyon. This fence blocked that side of the valley. Tex had built it to keep his stock from straying north, and he had built it well, using heavy live-oak posts and six strands of barbed-wire. There was no gate.

Chuck dismounted at the front porch and dropped his reins. Sally met him in the main room. She had noticed that he did not unsaddle at the stable. Sally Reed had been the prettiest girl in the valley, and she was still a pretty woman, in spite of her unhappiness.

"You're not staying, Chuck?" she said.

"No," he growled, "I'm not stayin'—I'm goin' to Curlew, as soon as I can put on a clean shirt."

"Is—is anything wrong?" she asked anxiously.

"Wrong?" Chuck laughed harshly. "Nothin' wrong—except that sweet brother of mine is back in the valley."

Sally stared at him in amazement, and he laughed at her.

"Tex?" she asked.

"Surprised, eh? Yeah—Tex!"

"Why—how did he—"

"Naw, he didn't break out. Ain't got the nerve to do that. Some knot-heads at the penitentiary paroled him. Maybe they want him to dig up the money he stole, so they can git it back."

"Is that fair, Chuck?" asked Sally. "After all, he's—"

He came closer to her, his voice harsh, when he spoke.

"Yeah, he's my brother. He's the man you'd have married—but yuh didn't. Blasted Injun-giver! Gave me this ranch, and just

Tex called Sally's name but there was no response

because I ain't got any deed, he's goin' to take it back. He'd take the roof from over yore head. Don't waste any sympathy over him."

Chuck went to his room, where she heard him banging things around. She sat down by a window, trying to adjust herself to the fact that Tex was back in Broken Bow Valley. Most of her married life had been spent in trying to figure out just why she had married Chuck Colton, and her only conclusion was—he looked just like Tex. Oh, Chuck had some good qualities, but they disappeared shortly after marriage.

Chuck had never made love to her while Tex was in the valley. All the men seemed to take it for granted that she belonged to Tex. That is, all except Sam Howard, who chummed with Chuck. Sam was a tall, well-built cowboy, who worked for the Tumbling K. Sally disliked him and did not care for his attentions, but he persisted, until Tex threw him out of the Eagle City dance-hall one night, and in a few moments proved to Sam's satisfaction that the object of his affections was well championed. Later, Sam Howard disappeared, and no one knew where he went.

Chuck came out, wearing a clean shirt, but otherwise unchanged.

"When will you be back?" asked Sally.

"What's the difference?" he asked coldly. "You wouldn't care if I never came back. Maybe I wouldn't either."

He banged the door behind him, mounted his horse and rode off the mesa, circling on an old road to pick up the main road to Curlew. Sally watched him out of sight. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "Maybe I wouldn't."

QUICKLY she changed her clothes, locked the house and went down to the stable, where she saddled her own horse. It was fifteen miles to the old Rafter R, where Uncle Toby and Aunt Emmeline would be waiting to welcome her home. She had just about made up her mind to never come back to the lonesome Arrowhead spread, and the abuse of Chuck Colton. Tex could have it, as far as she was concerned. After all, it was only "a roof over her head." Her mother and father had urged her to leave Chuck. Her father, Uncle Toby, had advised it months ago.

"Honey, don't you worry about no divorce," he had said. "You quit and come home to us, and just remember this—a grass-widder don't need no divorce. . . ."

It was the next day, after Tex's arrival in Eagle City, when "Hooty" McClung, one of the Circle H cowboys, came to town. Hooty was short, fat, gifted with a great thirst and a sense of humor. Hooty had sold a saddle to one of the boys for thirty-five dollars, and the money was burning a hole in his overalls.

He found Dude McKee, the deputy, who was short of cash, but long on thirst, and together they found Old Miracle Jones, from the Lazy A. Miracle was an old rawhider, about as big as a pint of soap, reputed a magnificent liar when sober, a veritable Munchausen when drunk. When Miracle laughed, his mustache, which only grew well on one side, bobbed up and down. He could also make his Adam's-apple do queer gyrations.

"I done heard that Tex is in town," said Miracle, as they lined up at the long bar in the War Bonnet, "and I come to do him homage."

"Yuh did, Miracle?" queried Hooty in amazement. "What's homage?"

Miracle downed his liquor, bobbed his mustache, gyrated his Adam's-apple, and made up a face.

"Homage?" he said huskily. "Why, that's—what would yuh do if yore grandfather came to town, Hooty?"

"I'd run like tarnation," said Hooty soberly. "The old gent's been dead over twenty years."

"They hung him, didn't they?" asked Dude. "Seems like I heard they did."

"They didn't," replied Hooty. "And what's more—no McClung has ever been hung."

"No McClung has ever been hung," chanted Dude. "What's the next line?"

"I come to do him homage," muttered Miracle Jones.

"You prob'ly come to do him dirt," said Hooty. "Have another drink."

They had several, which Hooty paid for. Miracle spoke, apropos of nothing whatever.

"Now, f'r instance, yuh take the way the Gov'mint is run in Washin'ton," he said.

"The Government," said Dude, "is for the people, by the people, so we will not perish from this earth. That's what Lincoln said."

"And look what we've done," said Miracle.

"That's right," agreed Hooty heartily. "Look what we've done."

"What have yuh done?" asked the bartender.

"Speakin' of Lincoln," said Miracle expansively, "my papa knowed him."

"That makes you one of his descendants, Miracle," said Hooty. "I'll buy some fresh drinks."

"A descendant of Lincoln?" asked Miracle.

"No—of yore papa."

"Oh, yeah. Well, here's cactus in yore pants, gents."

At dark they were still at the bar, with a greater part of that money yet unspent. With drinks at two-for-a-quarter, thirty-five dollars goes quite a ways. Miracle was at the crying stage, Dude was trying to remember the words of a song he had never heard, and Hooty was giving imitations of a one-string fiddle, by holding his nose with one hand, filling his cheeks with air, and

banging himself on the face with the other hand. To be honest with a one-string fiddle—it didn't.

Nate Peterson, the sheriff, looked in on them, shook his head sadly and went out. He had his own cross to bear—and Dude was of age. Anyway, they were not doing any harm—not yet. The bartender was owl-eyed, too. He took short ones, when they invited him, and he was wondering what was holding the trio up.

"What'r' you cryin' 'bout, par'ner?" he said to Miracle.

"Over a washted life," sobbed Miracle. "I washted m' youth, washted m' middle ages, and now—look at me."

"You are a spechimen," agreed Hooty. "Pos'tively re—repellant. You are a howlin' 'zample of what not to become like, Miracle. In the school housh they've got a pitcher, which kind of pulls down like a winder-shade, and on it is a pitcher of a feller with his outsides cut off, so yuh can shee jus' what's goin' on inshide him. It shows the ef'cts of alcohol on the human shystem. They wouldn't have to cut you open, Miracle—jus' hang yuh up."

"I," declared Miracle, "am a failure!"

"Tha's awful p'lite of yuh," said Dude. "I've never heard anybody speak that well of yuh, Miracle."

HOOTY grew owlish. "Does anybody," he asked, "know the wor's of 'Wait'll the shun shines, Nellie'?"

"I know 'm, when I shee 'em," said Dude.

"How'd they go, Dude?"

"Oh, all right."

"You shing'm and I'll im'tate m' fiddle."

"Oh, m' gosh!" exclaimed the bartender. "I'll buy a drink—if yuh don't."

There was an immediate acceptance. Miracle took his drink and became very thoughtful. He was trying to remember why he came to town. "I come to bury Sheezer, not to praise him," Hooty said.

"I 'member!" exclaimed Miracle. "I came to do homage to Tex."

"Tha's right!" exclaimed Hooty. "I 'member. I'll help yuh homage him. You'll help, too, won't yuh, Dude? We'll jest homage thunder out of him."

"All m' life," declared Dude, "I've wanted t' homage shomebody. How do yuh do it?"

Nobody seemed to know. The bartender, who is supposed to know everything, didn't know.

"I'm a little hazy 'bout it," he said.

"It's to honor him," explained Miracle. "Yuh know how yuh sherenade a girl? Well, tha's doin' homage to her."

"You make it sho shimple," cooed Hooty. "We sherenade him. How?"

"'F we had a fiddle," sighed Miracle. "'S far as that goes, I c'n play anythin'—if I had it."

"Lizzen," whispered the bartender. "In a back room is shomethin' t' play on. Belongs to the honkatonk. Oh, two, three horns, couple drums—I dunno what else. Slim'd murder me. But I got a key to outshide door. You'll bring 'em back and put 'em away?"

"Cross m' heart," declared Hooty. "Slim ain't never goin' t' know. Give me the key."

"I hol' you pershonally reshponshible, Hooty."

"I assept the honor you put upon me. Gimme the key. . . ."

Tex Colton had spent most of the day around the town. He saw a strange cowman, who didn't even wear high-heel boots, and was told that he was Al Fairchild, new owner of the Tumbling K. Dave Ashley had owned it for years, and was one of Tex's good friends. Several of Fairchild's cowboys were with him, but they were all strangers to Tex. In Tex's estimation, they looked "plenty salty."

Nate Peterson was a bachelor and roomed at the hotel, so he and Tex ate supper together, and then went to Tex's room, where they relaxed and talked over old times. The sheriff told Tex about Fairchild buying the Tumbling K from Dave Ashley.

"Dave was gettin' old," said the sheriff, "and wanted to take it easy. He got a good price, they say. I think he went back to Ohio. I ain't been able to get much acquainted with Fairchild. He brought in all new men for the Tumblin' K—and they're a forked bunch. Jim Corbin is their foreman."

"What became of Abe Harris?" asked Tex.

"I don't know where Abe went, after he sold out the War Bonnet."

TEX lighted the lamp and drew down the shades.

"What ever became of Sam Howard?" asked Tex.

"Shucks, I never did know, Tex. Why he left Broken Bow—it was before yore trial. Pulled out and never told anybody where he was goin'. Maybe Chuck knows. They was pretty good friends at that time. What do yuh aim on doin' down here?"

Tex grinned slowly. "Maybe I came down here to dig up that money, Nate."

"Good idea," nodded the sheriff. "It's been buried a long time."

"If I knew where it was," said Tex soberly. The sheriff looked narrowly at Tex for several moments.

"I ain't askin' questions," he said quietly.

"Thank yuh, Nate. As a matter of fact, I don't know where it is—because I wasn't the man who pulled that holdup."

The sheriff started to say something, but stopped. From down in the little lobby, or in the hallway, there was a commotion. They heard the hotel-man's voice, muffled by the

closed door, yelling.

"Yuh can't do that!" he was shouting. "Come down here, I tell yuh! Well, you danged—" the rest was lost.

The tall sheriff got to his feet, wondering what was going on. He was between the lighted lamp and the shade-covered window. There was a clatter of footsteps in the hallway, the rattle of metal—silence, as the noise stopped just outside Tex's door. Tex didn't get up, merely faced the door, a puzzled expression on his face.

Then it started, the most hideous conglomeration of discords ever drawn from brass instruments, accompanied by the rattling boom of a drum, while above it all soared the shrill voice of the hotel-man.

"Stop it, you danged coyotes! Stop it, I tell yuh!"

"Stop us!" yelled Miracle Jones' voice. "When we homage, we homage!"

Crash!

The window shade flipped inward, and glass splattered around the room, while from somewhere, not far away, came the rattling report of a rifle. Again it blasted, and more glass flew. The tall sheriff was falling, striking the table, and coming down with a crash. From out in the hall came a yelp.

"Get out of here—he's shootin' at us!"

Both bullets had smashed through the door, and one of them had wrecked Hooty's trombone. The trio of musicians collided at the top of the narrow stairs, and came down together, end over end, amid the crashing of the trombone, a French horn and the snare drum. Hooty was the only one able to leave via the front door, and he had one foot through the drum, kicking it along and trying to get loose from it.

## CHAPTER III

### *Bullets from Ambush*

IN A few moments the shooting brought men, seeking the cause of the shots. Tex Colton ran out to the top of the stairs and yelled for someone to bring a doctor. The place was quickly filled with inquiring people. They crowded into Tex's room, where Tex was examining the stricken man. But the sheriff wasn't killed, even if he was rather bloody about the head. The bullet had hit him just above the left ear, and cut a jagged furrow for about three inches.

He sat up, groaning hollowly, dazed from the shock. The doctor managed to get through the crowd and examine the sheriff. Everybody was asking Tex what happened, or examining the bullet holes in the window and door. Tex didn't know.

"It kind of looks like somebody shot from the roof of the War Bonnet," a man said.

"How do yuh figure that?" asked another.

"The angle of them bullets. If yuh shoot from the street, they'd go into the winder all right, but they'd angle into the ceilin'."

"Why'd anybody try to kill the sheriff?" asked another. The question was directed at Tex, who said nothing.

The sheriff was able to walk out, and went with the doctor, who insisted on taking him down to his home and putting in a few stitches. Tom Hefner, the hotel keeper, seemed to blame the embryo band for everything.

"I tried to stop 'em, but the danged fools was too many for me," he said. "And yuh should have seen 'em come down the stairs."

"Who were they?" asked Tex.

"Miracle Jones, Hooty McClung and Dude McKee, all drunker'n seven hundred dollars. I dunno what they was talkin' about, but they said they was goin' to homage you—whatever that means."

"Homage?" queried Tex. "Oh, yea-a-ah—I see. Nice of 'em."

"Uh-huh—real nice. I've got a busted front winder and two bullet-holes in the door. Nice goin's on, I'd say."

The bartender, off duty now, came over to the hotel. He was still a bit owl-eyed, but worried. He spoke to Hefner.

"Do you know where them pelicans went, Mr. Hefner?"

"I don't know—and I hope they never come back."

"Them dad-burned saddle-slickers will lose me my job," wailed the bartender. "There's a slide trombone tied around yore porch-post, and the drum is out there, both sides missin'. When Slim Burnett discovers I let them three fools have the key to that storeroom—I'm sunk."

"What was their idea?" asked Tex soberly.

"Idea? I don't know. They wanted to serenade yuh, I reckon. It was Miracle's idea—if yuh can call it that. Well, I'll just have to pick up the pieces, but there's no use figurin' out a lie about it. I can allus go back to punchin' cows, I reckon. Is the sheriff dead yet?"

"Not yet," replied Tex. "Did you hear the shots?"

"Not very plain. Too much noise in the saloon. Some of them Tumblin' K punchers was singin'. Well, I reckon it can't be helped."

The bartender went out.

"Do yuh want I should put yuh in another room, Tex?" Hefner asked.

"Shucks, no," grinned Tex. "I like plenty ventilation."

Tex went back up to his room, where one

of Hefner's maids had made a very wet attempt to clean up the blood and glass. The holes in the window and the door were evidence that the shots had been fired from the top of a building across the street, probably the roof of the War Bonnet.

Tex sat down, rolled a cigaret and wondered just who wanted to kill him. No one would have known that the sheriff was with him, and they shot at the silhouete against the window-shade. It didn't seem to make sense. The only person he had had words with was Chuck, and there was no reason for him to do such a thing. Or was there?

Tex had told him that he was going to take back the ranch. Maybe that ranch was worth a lot to Chuck—enough to make him kill to keep it. Tex had no delusions about his brother. Tex's mind switched to what Hefner had said about Sally writing him, and never getting an answer. Uncle Toby, too, had written. Tex didn't want to write first. But he certainly would have answered any letter that had come to him. Well, that was all in the past now, and the future didn't look any too bright. . . .

Eagle City was almost in the exact center of the valley, which comprised most of the county. Being the only town in the valley, it was the outfitting center for all the cattle spreads in that part of the country. In Broken Bow Valley were the Tumbling K, Rafter R, Circle H, Lazy A, Diamond J and Tex Colton's Arrowhead brand.

The population of Eagle City had never numbered over a thousand. The buildings were all of frame construction, the business houses, fronting on the one business street were all of the false-front type, either unpainted, or the paint worn away until no color remained. Most of the signs were so weathered and sand-blasted that the lettering was very faint, or gone entirely.

THE town of Curlew was twenty miles away, at the head of the valley, and every twenty-four hours the old stage creaked a round-trip from Eagle City. The road was narrow, extremely dangerous at places, but Broken Bow Valley had no money for road improvement nor maintenance.

Next morning Eagle City was still excited over the attempted murder of their sheriff. No one seemed to consider that the sheriff had been mistaken for Tex Colton, nor did they seem to wonder why the sheriff was in Tex's room at the hotel. The sheriff was back on the job, wearing a few extra stitches in his head, but otherwise all right.

"Yuh're a marked man, Nate," declared Dude McKee. "I can almost look upon yuh as somebody I used to know."

"You should have took up undertakin'," growled Nate. "And, cuss yuh, I ain't dead yet."

"No, you ain't, Natie—but yuh're in the sere and yaller leaf, as the poet says," replied Dude. "Yuh know, I've been worryin' all mornin' about who' I'll appoint for my deputy."

"Yore what?" snorted the sheriff.

"Well, Nate, when they unseal yore earthly envelope, I'll be sheriff. It's the law. And I can't figure out just who I'd hire. Maybe you can help me."

The sheriff put on his hat and went out, mumbling something about his sister having queer ideas. He always blamed Dude's wife for what Dude did. The bartender at the War Bonnet wanted Dude to pay for the wrecked instruments, but Dude had no money.

"Listen, m' friend," he said. "The law says that when it's an act of God—"

"Tell that to Slim Burnett!" exploded the bartender. "And don't yuh forget—I've read the Bible, too, Dude."

"What does it say?" asked Dude blandly. "Tell me that, will yuh?"

"Well, there ain't nothin' in it about three blamed fools and some borrowed band instruments—I know that much."

"You read it all the way through, and you'd be surprised."

"I'll prob'ly have plenty time—as soon as Slim Burnett finds out what happened."

Miracle Jones, out at the Lazy A, was trying to explain to Old Tuck Ames just what happened, as they ate breakfast at the ranch.

"Yuh see," said Miracle, "I went to town and met Dude McKee and Hooty McClung. We—"

"Yuh all got drunk," finished Old Tuck, spearing a piece of bacon from a platter.

"Gosh—no!" exclaimed Miracle. "You didn't smell no liquor on me last night, Tuck."

"No," admitted the owner of the Lazy A, "I didn't, but how could I? You tied yore horse to the bunk-house door, and slept in a stall. What happened?"

"Well, we tried to serenade Tex Colton in the hotel, and the son-of-a-gun shot twice at us through the door. He killed somebody—I dunno who. Dude said it was the sheriff—I dunno."

"My gosh!" gasped Old Tuck. "You set there and—yuh say that Tex shot through the door at yuh—and killed Nate Peterson?"

"Somethin' like that, Tuck. They've prob'ly hung Tex by this time."

"You wash them dishes!" blurted Old Tuck. "I'm goin' to town!"

Tex Colton didn't seem much disturbed over the supposed attempt on his life. He talked with the sheriff, who was feeling pretty good, but puzzled by what had happened the night before. That morning a stranger rode quietly into Eagle City. He looked no different than the rank-and-file of Broken Bow folks. Possibly fifty, slightly

gray at the temples. He sauntered over to the sheriff's office, finding the sheriff alone, and then introduced himself as Harry Creedon.

"What I tell you must be in confidence, sheriff," he said quietly. "I am a detective, working for the Midland Express Company."

"Trailin' Tex Colton?" asked the sheriff. Creedon smiled slowly.

"Just looking around," he said. "Colton is here?"

"Yeah, he's here. But, just between me and you, I don't believe he ever stole that money."

"Why did he come back here, sheriff?"

Nate Peterson shook his head. "I don't know."

"He got the money all right," said Creedon. "Naturally, he's not going to dig it up and show it to everybody. I want to meet Colton, but he must not suspect who I am. Maybe I could be an old friend of yours, sheriff."

"Yeah," agreed the sheriff, but dubiously. "I've been here a long time, and folks would know—"

"We knew each other when we were kids. How would that be?"

"Yeah, that'd be all right. Hang around, Mr. Creedon."

"Call me Harry."

Dude McKee dropped in and the sheriff introduced him to Creedon.

"Boyhood chums, huh?" marveled Duke, shaking hands with Creedon. "Well, well! Did you grow up in Cheyenne, too, Mr. Creedon?"

"That's right," agreed Creedon heartily. "Great old town, Cheyenne."

VAINLY the sheriff made futile signals, for Creedon talked on about their boyhood days in Cheyenne. After Dude went out Creedon laughed.

"You see," he remarked, "it isn't hard to deceive, sheriff."

"That's yore idea," sighed the sheriff. "Dude knows cussed well I was born and raised in Miles City, Montana. Shucks, I ain't never been to Cheyenne in my life."

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Creedon. "He won't tell, will he?"

"That remains to be seen. He thinks he's got a swell joke."

"I guess," sighed the detective, "we didn't rehearse enough."

Dude found Tex at the livery-stable, and they sat on the corral fence together. Dude told him about the stranger at the office, who was supposed to be an old childhood friend of the sheriff.

"But I foxed 'em," grinned Dude. "Old Nate was settin' there, tryin' to signal this stranger to pull up his loop, but he didn't notice. Huh, he done everythin', except hit the feller with the brand-register. What do yuh reckon was the idea of all that lyin', Tex?"

"Simple," sighed Tex. "This stranger is prob'ly a range detective, workin' for the express company, and is down here to catch me diggin' up all that plunder. He had to get in with the sheriff. You watch, Dude—they'll be meetin' me pretty quick, and poor Old Nate will perjure his immortal soul, lyin' about this feller."

"I hope I'm present," grinned Dude.

"You won't—Nate will see to that, Dude. How does he feel about bein' a target?"

"Jumpy," grinned Dude. "But yuh can't blame him, Tex. An inch closer, and Nate would have traded his star for a harp. Be an awful shame, too, 'cause Nate ain't got no ear for music. But," Dude sighed, "mebbe they just give 'em the harp and let 'em bang the devil out of it, regardless."

"Did yuh ever stop to consider that they wasn't tryin' to kill Nate?" asked Tex quietly.

"They—they shot at him, didn't they?"

"Look at it this way," suggested Tex. "The lamp was on the table, and Nate was between the lamp and the window-shade. When he stood up, his shadow was on that shade. And another thing, Dude—that was my room—not Nate's."

"Yea-a-a-h!" snorted the deputy. "By golly, yo're right, Tex! They'd think you was in there alone. Yea-a-ah, that's right."

"Ain't you scared to be settin' near me, Dude?"

"Yeah, I am, but—here comes Old Tuck Ames, kickin' the ribs out of one of his broom-tails!"

The old owner of the Lazy A booted his horse up close to the corral fence, reached out and shook hands with Tex. Neither of them spoke, as they shook hands.

"Miracle Jones is a liar!" Old Tuck said. "He said that you'd be hung by this time, Tex."

"Disappointed?" asked Tex curiously.

"Why, darn yore long-geared hide!" spat the old man, climbing off his horse. "Disappointed? I've got a good notion to yank yuh off the fence and paw yuh unconscious. How are yuh, Tex?"

"Tuck," replied Tex, "if I felt any better, I'd have to be tied. You look fine, Tuck."

"I ain't though, Tex. Nope, I'm just kind of pokin' around, too lazy to work and too ornery to die. Is Nate Peterson dead yet, Dude?"

"Not yet," replied the deputy soberly, "but ain't given up hopes. Yuh know, yuh can't have everythin'."

"That's right," agreed Old Tuck soberly. "Miracle never gets anythin' right. He said that Tex shot twice through the door, and that Nate prob'ly got killed."

"That ain't the way I got it," said Dude,

"and I was with Miracle."

In a few words, trying to efface their own guilt, Dude told Toby what actually happened.

The old cowman chuckled.

"Imagine Miracle tryin' to play a trombone!" he snorted.

"I was good on that drum," said Dude, "but yuh should have heard Hooty on that French horn. My, my! He shore is a good'n."

Tuck chuckled, but looked soberly at Tex.

"How long are yuh out for, Tex?" he asked.

"All time—if I behave myself."

"You won't. Seen Chuck?"

"Yeah, I talked with him the day I got here."

"Looks more like yuh every day, Tex. But he ain't no good. Gambles and drinks up every cent he makes. I seen Toby Reed today. Sally's home. Toby says he ain't goin' to let her go back to him. Toby knows yuh're back. Chuck told Sally. You see, Toby wrote yuh letters, but yuh didn't answer 'em, Tex."

"Yeah, I heard about that, Tuck. But I never got 'em."

"Didn't, huh? Didn't get any letters from Sally either?"

FROWNING, Tex shook his head. "Not one, Tuck."

"Well," said Tuck, "I know blasted well that two of 'em was posted, because I posted 'em myself—right into the post office."

Tex stared grimly into space, wondering how they got lost. The sheriff and Creedon came from the office and went up to the hotel. Dude grinned. When the sheriff came back alone, Dude went over to the office.

"Hyah, Cheyenne," said Dude soberly. "Great old town, eh?"

"Some day, Dude," declared the sheriff, "you'll open that big mouth of yours, and I'll jump right down it. Creedon is a detective, sent here to keep an eye on Tex Colton."

If the sheriff expected Dude to be surprised, he was disappointed.

"Yeah," said Dude, "that's what Tex said."

Nate Peterson looked curiously at his deputy.

"I suspect you talked too much," he said.

"I didn't know he was a detective—until Tex told me."

"Well," sighed the sheriff, "I reckon I can tell Mr. Creedon he can go home."

"If he ain't got that much sense, he's holdin' down the wrong job."

The sheriff found Creedon at the hotel and told him what Dude had said. The detective was disappointed.

"I can't understand how he would know—unless he was told," he said.

"You can brand that one—and throw it in with the rusties," said the sheriff warmly. "I'm the only one that knew—and I don't tell."

"Sorry," said Creedon. "I didn't mean it that way. Anyway, I'll stick around a few days, and see what happens."

Tex saw Creedon several times that day, but the detective made no effort to talk with him. Being Saturday there were many people in town. Someone said it was payday at the Tumbling K, and the crew came in early. They were all strangers to Tex. Dude had pointed out Jim Corbin, the foreman. In addition to Corbin, there were six Tumbling K riders.

Soon afterward Corbin left the saloon.

Riders came in from all the other ranches, and business was brisk at the War Bonnet and Casino Saloons. The Casino was a small place, not as gaudy nor as well patronized as the War Bonnet. They only ran one game—draw poker. Tex had not turned a card for a long time, and he really did enjoy a moderate game of poker, so he took a seat at the Casino. The stakes were not high. The game drifted on, with little action. Players changed, but new blood didn't help much.

Tex was ready to cash in a few dollars and leave the game, when some of the Tumbling K riders drifted in, fairly well loaded with

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liquor, and lined up at the bar. Tex paid no attention to them, but he heard some of their conversation. He asked the dealer to cash in his chips, and leaned back in his chair. He saw Creedon, the detective come in, and question the bartender.

Tex couldn't hear Creedon's question, but he heard Creedon speak.

"That's funny," said Creedon. "I was sure he came in here."

"Wearin' a white hat and black chaps, huh?" grunted the bartender.

"That's right."

IT FLASHED through Tex's mind that Jim Corbin wore a white sombrero and black chaps, trimmed in silver. A Tumbling K cowboy came through the rear entrance. The dealer gave Tex several silver dollars as the cowboy watched.

"That must be kind of like penny-ante for a feller with all the money he's got staked out," said the man who had just arrived.

He was a long-faced, buck-toothed Tumbling K cowboy, chuckling at his own wit. Tex's eyes flashed to Creedon, standing at the bar, a half-grin on his face. Tex pocketed the money and got out of his chair, slowly and deliberately.

"Yuh know, this town don't care who stays here," the cowboy said. "Convicted train robbers, and anything else that yuh can scrape up."

Tex realized that it was a weak attempt to start trouble. Maybe it was a frame-up. This long-faced puncher looked like a killer. But Tex was too smart to fall into a trap quickly. He saw the bartender getting all set to hit the floor.

The dealer had stopped, half-way through a shuffle, and was looking anxiously at the tall cowboy at the bar.

Tex didn't hurry, nor did he change expression. The loud-mouthed puncher was flanked by two companions. Tex yawned and walked slowly over to him, and the man on the puncher's left stepped aside, going slowly around to a spot near the corner of the pool table.

Tex stopped very close to his would-be tormentor, and the man didn't like it. He started to move aside, trying to give himself more room. Tex had his gun-side too cramped. He said:

"Hey, what 'r'yuh tryin' to do, anyway?" he demanded.

He lifted his two hands, intending to shove Tex away, and at that moment Tex hit him square in the arch of his ribs, with a terrific right smash.

The man's big mouth popped wide open, and as he was falling the room shuddered to the heavy report of a gun, and the big light went out.

Someone had deliberately smashed the lamp!

## CHAPTER IV

### *Dangerous Snares*

AS TWO more shots flashed in the dark room, Tex Colton dropped flat on the floor. Someone fell over him, cursing and clawing. Men were trying to get out the front door, and Tex heard the rear door bang shut. Someone was yelling for a light. Tex got slowly to his feet. Men were milling around in the street, trying to tell each other what had happened. Tex heard the sheriff yelling for somebody to get a lantern. Then he went out the back doorway, leaving the door open a few inches.

Someone brought the lantern, and the sheriff came in, followed by too many men for the size of the room. Dude kept some of them back, while the sheriff made his examination.

"My gosh, it's the detective!" Tex heard him say. "Dead as a door-knob, too!"

"And he got Andy Miles, sheriff!" said an excited voice.

"Who got Andy Miles?" asked Dude.

"Tex Colton."

"Who shot out the light?" asked the sheriff. There was silence for a few moments.

"I reckon mebbe it was Tex Colton," a man finally said. "Shucks, it all happened so quick."

"What do you mean about a detective?" asked Jim Corbin.

"That feller was a detective," said the sheriff. "He came here to trail Tex Colton."

"No wonder Colton killed him!"

"I seen Tex shoot out the light," offered a cowboy.

No one disputed the assertion.

"It kind of looks like Tex Colton was brimstone on wheels," the sheriff said.

"Here's the doctor," said someone at the door.

Tex trotted down to the stable, threw the loose saddle on his horse and went out the back way. A hundred yards off from the main street he cinched the saddle and mounted. Men were already searching the stable. It was plain to Tex now that the Tumbling K were after his scalp. They had failed to kill him through the window, and it was evident that their pet gun-man had made an attempt, only to get knocked down. Then one man, probably delegated to the job, shot out the lights. But was the killing of Creedon deliberate or accidental? Could have been either.

Tex didn't know what to do next. Evident-

ly the gang in the saloon was perfectly willing to swear him into jail, and Nate Peterson could do no less than to jail him on their evidence, regardless of friendship.

Failing to find his horse and saddle at the stable, men were going back up the street. Tex swung around the town and struck the road to the Rafter R. He wanted a talk with Uncle Toby Reed, and after that he would map out his next move. Tex realized how easy it would be to convict him. A paroled convict hasn't a chance on earth in a case of this kind, so his best bet was to keep away from the law.

It had been a long time since he visited the Rafter R, but the old place was unchanged. There was a light in the main room, as he dismounted in front of the long porch. There was another horse tied to the porch, but at a far corner, and the animal had swung around into the shadow.

As Tex stepped up on the porch he heard voices, pitched rather high for ordinary conversation, and as he came up to the door, it opened in front of him, and there stood Chuck, his back to the opening. Chuck had a gun in his hand.

"—and don't yuh forget it," he was saying. "When I go back to that ranch, I don't want to find you there. I'm through with yuh. Blast yuh, I'm through with all of yuh. I'm through with Broken Bow Valley. As far as I'm concerned—"

But at that moment Tex's long arms went around Chuck, blocking his gun-hand, and they fell forward in a heap.

Sally screamed as they banged down heavily. Tex tore the gun away from Chuck and threw it aside. Then he got up quickly and glanced around.

Aunt Emmeline, Sally and Uncle Toby were grouped in front of the fireplace, staring at him. Chuck sat up, grunting painfully, flexing his arms and legs. Then before anyone realized his intentions, he got half-way to his feet and went out through the doorway in a diving leap.

They heard him run the length of the porch, tear his reins loose from the post, and a moment later his horse was running down across the yard.

Sally was crying, but Aunt Emmeline and Uncle Toby were grim-faced. "We are very glad to see you, Tex," Aunt Emmeline said.

"Hell's Bells!" yelped Uncle Toby. "Glad to see him! Tex, you darned old pelican—why ain't yuh been out? Sally, stop cryin'! Say somethin', Tex."

"What was Chuck doin' with that gun?" asked Tex.

"Threatening us," replied Aunt Emmeline. "He came out here to force Sally to go back with him, and ended up by telling her to not come. He's crazy."

"Mebbe he's just forgetful," said Tex calmly.

UNCLE Toby came over and shook hands with Tex.

"Emmeline put on the coffee-pot," he said. "And round up them doughnuts. I ain't forgot what he likes. Set down, Tex, you old son-of-a-rooster! Sally, don't yuh realize that Tex is here?"

"Wait a minute," said Tex soberly. "I can't stay, Uncle Toby. The law is trailin' me."

"The law?" Uncle Toby looked blankly at Tex. "Why, I thought—"

"Tonight," said Tex grimly, "two men were killed in the Casino. One was a Tumblin' K puncher, and the other was a detective, sent here to trail me. The light was shot out—but I never even drew a gun. That Tumblin' K outfit are after my scalp. I ain't sure why, but I've got a hunch.

"You can't take any chances, Toby. The only way sheep can get in, except over the road, is through my place. I'll bet dollars to doughnuts that Chuck sold out to Van Leuven—and that Van Leuven owns the Tumblin' K."

"Sheep?" queried the old cowman. "Yuh mean they're comin' to Broken Bow Valley, Tex—comin' through yore place?"

"That's my bet—and soon."

"That is where Chuck got all the money he's been spending," said Sally. "He hasn't sold anything, but he's got a lot of money. Oh, Tex, I'll bet you are right."

"But what's to be done?" asked Uncle Toby anxiously.

"Get some men together," said Tex. "Block that line of fence between the cliff and the canyon. They'll have to come through there."

"Yeah, yeah, that's right. But what about you, Tex?"

"I'll get along, folks. As soon as Chuck gets to Eagle City he'll tell 'em where I am, so I better not be here. Maybe I'll be seein' yuh again, but it won't be from between the bars. I had enough of that."

"Tex, I can't say anything," said Sally tearfully. "You—it would take too long to explain everything."

"I know," nodded Tex. "I didn't get yore letters, Sally. I never got a letter from anybody—in three years. Well, I'll be movin'. Adios."

"Wait, Tex!" called the practical Aunt Emmeline. "I'll get you some blankets and a little food. You can't go like that."

But Tex was already in the saddle and galloping away in the night.

"Well," said Uncle Toby resignedly, "what can yuh do?"

"You can try to stop them sheep," replied his wife.

"Yeah, yeah, that's right. Hm-m-m-m. Two men killed and the light blowed out. Blamin' Tex—of course. Wait'll I get a chance to tell Nate Peterson what I think

about it. I'll burn his pants."

"You won't burn nobody's pants," said his wife. "You'll throw a saddle on a horse and high-tail down the valley. Or do yuh want sheep?"

"Oh, m' golly, I forgot, Emmeline. Excuse my French language. B'ile up some coffee, will yuh? I need a bracer."

"You saddle that horse, Toby Reed. Sally, don't cry. Darn it, I spend half my life, tellin' folks what to do!"

"Yeah," said Toby, "and yuh spend the other half wonderin' why they don't do it."

Even Sally had to laugh at that, and the tension was broken.

"Don't worry about Tex," said Toby. "He knows every corner of this valley. Well, I better saddle that horse and start ridin', if I don't want wool in my meals. . . ."

Before daylight next morning Tex had finished his breakfast in his own ranchhouse. The wire fence was untouched. He had slept away from the house, but no one came looking for him. He hid his horse and carried food to the animal. In the bedroom he found his old 30-30 Winchester and a goodly supply of ammunition. It might come in handy now.

From the front of the house he could watch the road to Eagle City. Everything was quiet, but Tex was playing his hunch. He reasoned that Sunday would be a good time for the sheep invasion, when the men on the ranches would sleep late, and few, if any, would ride the range.

From the window of the lean-to kitchen he could see the fence and most of the corral, but the stable was farther to the left, and rather difficult to see from the window. It was nearly full daylight, with Tex seated beside the kitchen window, when he saw two men go past the corral and over to the end of the fence against the cliff. Tex swung the window open and rested his rifle across the sill. He didn't want to commit murder, but he wasn't going to let those two men cut the wires.

One man was starting to use his pliers, when Tex's first bullet smashed into the post, only inches away from both of them. Before the echoes blasted back from the cliffs, both men were diving for a pile of rocks at the corner of the corral. Tex chuckled grimly. The battle was on now.

The men were only armed with six-shooters, and the distance was a full hundred yards, which was not good range for a handgun. However, they soon figured out where Tex was located and proceeded to throw lead. Only one shot out of a dozen hit the window, and that one was up near the top.

AT ONCE Tex realized that the men could crawl behind the rocks and gain cover at the stable, unless he could stop them between rocks. He smashed a bullet into the cliff behind them, but they kept low, realizing that the range was too much for their hasty aim. An exposed arm might connect with a soft-nose bullet.

Tex had hopes that if he could hold them long enough, Uncle Toby and some of the cattlemen might show up. Then he heard one of them yelling orders at somebody. It was evident that more of their gang had arrived. This complicated things for Tex. He could only be in one spot at a time. He smashed another bullet into the cliff, down close behind the rocks, and then ran into the main room. The road was empty. He darted into the bedroom, where he could see the stable. A man was just leading two horses around the corner. Back he went to the kitchen window, but his two men were still there, safe behind the rocks.

For the next fifteen minutes Tex spent his time, going from point to point, watching the road to town, the stable, and back to the kitchen. But not a shot had been fired since his last one. Tex couldn't understand it. In fact, it was disturbing to Tex. He went back to the bedroom and took a cautious look at the stable, just in time to see Sally walk into the stable, leading her saddled horse. Then the door banged shut.

They had seen her coming, and that was why there had been no shooting. Now she was in the stable, right into the hands of the enemy. He ran into the kitchen and took a look. The two men were trying to worm their way in behind the corral. Tex was not trying to scare anybody now. He notched his sight on a small section of a crawler, and squeezed the trigger. In answer to his shot, the window began to disintegrate, as shot after shot poured through, wrecking kitchen utensils and dishes. They were shooting from the stable, and the window-angle was bad. Tex took a cautious look, and that bit of color between the rocks was still there.

"That's one I won't have to worry about," he said grimly.

Suddenly the shooting started again and he heard the bedroom window being shot into shreds. The shooting was coming from the stable, and Tex didn't dare shoot at the stable. Tex didn't realize that the heavy fire was a cover, allowing some of the men to take a new position, where they could fire into the front and side of the house. But he found that out, when he went to the front to see if he could get a view down the road to Eagle City. The bullets came through the window, and some of them came smashing through the door. A framed picture was cut loose from the wall, and crashed to the floor. A vase on the fireplace mantel was shattered into bits.

There was a man down behind a fence-post and some piled boulders, working a rifle as fast as he could pump in the shells. Tex took a quick aim through the shattered window,

and he saw the man go backwards, his rifle toppling off the rocks and inside the fence.

"I'm gettin' more of them than they are of me," he said grimly, and raced back into the kitchen.

The shooting slacked again and for possibly ten minutes not a sound was heard, except the peaceful calling of a mocking-bird outside the kitchen window. Tex's ears were tuned for any unusual noises, but he was watching the fence between the cliff and the canyon.

Suddenly a rider came around the cliff and halted against the fence. He stood in his stirrups and looked all around, as though expecting somebody. Tex drew a bead on him, but waited. The man yelled loudly, and lifted his hat high in his right hand. Tex shifted his aim and squeezed the trigger. The man still sat there, hand upraised, but the hat was gone. Then he whirled his horse and went lurching back out of sight. It was evidently some man from the sheep outfit, surprised to not find the fence all cut away, and men waiting to welcome him.

"Now, what good did that do me?" asked Tex, as he levered another shell into the chamber, and replaced it in the magazine.

A bullet came through the front of the house, tore through a side of the door-frame, and smacked into a copper kettle on the wall. Tex dropped to his hands and knees, trying to keep below the line of fire, and started to crawl into the main room. A bullet sang over his head and smacked into the wall. Tex turned his head to look at the bullet-hole, when something smacked against the side of his head, and everything turned upside down for him. A soft-nose bullet had torn a chunk off the front door, and that chunk of oak hit Tex over the left ear, knocking him senseless.

Tex had no idea how long he was unconscious. He awoke to find himself tied tightly, and blindfolded, lying on the ground. It was long before his mind began to function properly, and he realized that he had been captured. He seemed to feel all right, except for a dull ache in his head and a great thirst.

But he did not attempt to move nor make a sound. He could hear voices at a distance, and the shuffle of boots, as someone came over close to him. But the man walked away, and he heard a man complaining.

"Cuss him, he filled my eyes with rock-dust, and I don't know if I'll ever see again," the man said.

"Ain't much to see, anyway," said someone.

THE men evidently moved in closer to Tex, because he could hear their voices plainly now.

"Aw, quit kickin' about rock-dust," said another man. "Look at Corbin—he's through."

Then a voice, which seemed to carry authority, and which Tex believed belonged to Al Fairchild, owner of the Tumbling K, cut in harshly.

"Load him and that woman on hosses as fast as yuh can. We've got to get 'em out of sight."

"There's a good place up the canyon," said a man. "Them old cliff houses."

"All right, all right! Any place—but shake a leg. We'll cut the fence and drift the sheep in. Two of you go with the prisoners."

"They've got her all loaded," said one of them. "Ed's got her."

"All right, fine. Bill, you pile this hombre on a hoss, and follow Ed. And don't be slow about it. We've got to clean up here."

It seemed a long time before the man came with the horse, and he had trouble with the animal which didn't like the idea of a trussed load. The man cursed the job they had given him, and was just trying to lift Tex to a sitting position, when Tex heard the rapid beating of hoofs.

The man let Tex fall back. Then he heard Chuck's voice.

"Don't cut that fence!" Chuck was yelling. "Don't cut it, I tell yuh! Get out of here! There's a posse comin'! They ain't a mile away now!"

"Cut it, you stupid fools!" yelled Fairchild. "We've got to get out that way!"

There was no time to put Tex on the horse. The man sprang into the saddle, and the horses' hoofs kicked gravel over Tex, as it surged away. Tex heard the posse ride in, and they came fast.

"Look at them winders!" someone yelled. "All shot out! Hey! There's somebody!"

They found Tex beside the corral fence and cut him loose. The posse was composed of the sheriff, deputy, Uncle Toby, Tuck Ames, Miracle Jones and Hooty McClung.

Tex had a swollen temple and one discolored eye, but he was quite able to get to his feet unassisted.

"Hang it, we didn't git here soon enough!" wailed Uncle Toby.

They found Jim Corbin. He was badly hurt, but conscious. In a few words Tex told them what happened—told them that Sally was a prisoner. They all went to

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Corbin. The sheriff was grim over the affair, but said nothing about his all-night hunt for Tex.

"They all pulled out on yuh, Corbin," said Tex. Corbin cursed everybody concerned, and said he knew he was going to die, but wanted a doctor.

"You'll get a doctor, Corbin, if yo're honest," Tex said. "Why did you kill Creedon, the detective?"

"Why?" whispered Corbin. "Cuss him, he recognized me. I wasn't goin' to let him —what are you talkin' about? I didn't—"

"And you killed Andy Miles," accused Tex.

"Clumsy fool!" gasped Corbin. "I shot at you, Colton. It was an accident—the killin' of Miles. Get me a doctor, I'm dyin'."

"What was Chuck's part in this sheep deal?" asked Tex.

"He sold out to Fairchild, the poor fool."

"And got licked by a sheepherder in Burnt Fork."

"That shepherd," said Corbin painfully, "used to be a puncher, and—he—knew—Chuck—sold—out—Broken—"

"Fainted," said the sheriff. He turned to Tex.

"That clears you in that shootin', Tex—and I'm glad."

"What'll we do about Sally?" asked Uncle Toby anxiously.

Tex rubbed his sore head, as he looked at the sheriff. "Lend me yore gun and belt, Nate," he said. "They got mine."

"What for, Tex?"

"I'm goin' to find Sally—and I'm goin' alone. They might shoot her to keep her from talkin'. She seen all of 'em. I'll go alone. She'll be somewhere in the canyon —and I've got to find her. Mebbe I can't make a move in there until dark."

"Tex is right," said Dude. "If we all go boilin' into that canyon, we might never git her back."

"All right," conceded Uncle Toby, "but remember this, Tex; if you and her ain't out of there tomorrow mornin', there'll be the dangdest posse yuh ever seen comin' up the canyon."

"Suits me," nodded Tex.

"Take my hoss, Tex," said Hooty. "He's sure-footed as a goat."

"I'm goin' on foot," said Tex, buckling on the sheriff's gun. "Take Corbin to a doctor, but leave enough men here to block that fence."

"We'll handle all that, Tex. You get goin'."

They watched the tall cowboy go angling down through the brush toward the mouth of the canyon.

"One thing's in his favor, anyway," Miracle Jones said quietly.

"What's that?" asked the sheriff.

"He won't have to shut one eye to take aim. . . ."

## CHAPTER V

### *Secret of the Gorge*

FOLLOWING a search, the baffled sheepmen found their sheep about a mile from the fence, and the man in charge was properly indignant. Somebody had shot his hat out of his hand, down there at the fence. But his indignation meant nothing to Al Fairchild. They had played an expensive game, and lost. There was no use to make another try for Broken Bow Valley. The men grouped around the edge of the canyon, watching their back trail. Fairchild checked his men.

"Bill, I thought you brought Tex Colton along," he said.

"Not with a posse that close," said Bill. "I came with you fellers."

Fairchild indulged in some plain and fancy profanity, but it was without any effect on his disgruntled crew. Tex Colton had blocked them, and they had no stomach to meet the punchers of Broken Bow Valley.

"One man, blast him!" raged Fairchild. "It cost us a fortune to buy out that Tumblin' K. It cost money to pay Chuck Colton."

"Yeah," said a cowboy dismally, "and if any of us ever show up there again, they'll hang us."

"No, they won't," denied Fairchild. "Gosh, all we done was try to get sheep in there. No law against tryin'."

"Yeah, that part's all right, Al, but they do hang yuh for stealin' a woman. Jim Corbin wasn't dead yet, and I wouldn't trust him as far as I could kick an anvil. He'll talk."

Fairchild was silent. He knew that this man was right.

"We was crazy to molest that woman," another man said.

"That was Corbin's idea," growled Fairchild. "Where's Chuck?"

"I think he went the other way. He didn't know we got his wife."

"Cussed little he cares about her. All right, let's get action. Take the sheep back to Burnt Fork. Hold 'em in Curlew for cars. I'll lose every blamed cent I've made on this deal, thanks to Tex Colton. Why didn't we shove a hot bullet into him when we had the chance?"

"What about Ed?" asked Bill. "He'll wait for somebody—down there in the canyon."

"Let him wait," growled Fairchild. "He'll come out when he gets hungry enough. He must have that much sense."

"But what about the woman?" said man. "She'll have to eat."

"You go feed her," said Fairchild sarcastically, "I won't."

"All right," sighed the man, "but count me out of holdin' sheep in Curlew. I'm headin' for Mexico pronto. I think a lot of my own neck."

The men turned the five thousand head of sheep, and they started back along the canyon, a cloud of dust billowing up from their line of march. The sheep were thirsty, hungry and tired, but there was no help for them short of Curlew.

Nightfall found Tex Colton high up on the cliffs above the old cliff dwellings. From here he could look down upon the old ruins, but was unable to see anyone. Tex reasoned that Sally's captor would watch the canyon from below, and that his best chance was to come in from above—if possible.

So far it hadn't been possible. Evidently the man who took Sally into the canyon didn't know about the posse nor the changed plans of his companions, as he had gone away ahead of Chuck's warning. Tex knew that the sheep men, foiled in their attempt to break into Broken Bow Valley, would not make another attempt soon—if ever. He wondered what Sally's captor would do, when no one else came to tell him what to do.

Tex snaked along the ledge, where a fall would drop him a hundred feet against jagged rocks, and tried to figure a way down, before the light was all gone. He finally reached a chimney-like fissure, which angled down to one of the old ruins. It would be a dangerous way to get down, but as far as Tex could see it was the only way. By wedging himself into the fissure, hanging on with hands, elbows, knees and feet, he might get down safely. If the walls crumbled—well, that was something to worry about when they started crumbling.

Carefully he let himself into the fissure, and began wedging his way slowly. It was difficult going, because his clothes and belt would hang up on obstructions, and he would have to lift back, unhook and go on. It was too dark now for him to see just where to make his moves now, and he was obliged to move very carefully. He could look up and see the sky far above, and wondered how he had ever come down that sort of three-sided chimney.

Suddenly a lot of loose rock broke below him and went banging down, followed by loose rubble. Tex thought for a moment that everything was coming loose below him. Then he heard a man let out a yell.

"What the devil was that?"

The voice didn't sound so far away. Tex held perfectly still, waiting for the man to speak again. It was too dark for Tex to see him, and Tex was glad it was so dark that the man couldn't see him. He would make a fine target, hanging there in the fissure, unable to use his gun.

AFTER a space of time, in which Tex heard the footsteps moving away on the rocks, Tex started down again. All went well for possibly ten more feet, when more rocks and rubble went spewing down, making a loud clatter. The man was running back, swearing in a frightened voice.

"What's doin' that?" he said. "Blast yuh, can't yuh talk?"

From his voice he couldn't have been more than twenty feet below Tex, who decided on a ruse.

"All right, men!" he yelled loudly. "Close in—I've blocked this side!"

The man whirled and went stumbling away over the uneven footing. He was going while the going was good. Twice his gun blasted, farther down the rocks, and Tex laughed.

"Shootin' at shadows, eh? All right, Mister, go ahead and save yore own skin, if yuh can."

A few moments later Tex came down, along with a lot of loose rock and gravel, but landed right side up, both elbows and knees torn and bleeding, but thankful to be down there. It was so dark he couldn't see anything. Moving carefully he went through a broken wall of one of the ancient dwellings. There was a little starlight here.

Across the canyon the moonlight was glinting on the cliffs, and Tex knew that in a short time he would have light enough to make a search for Sally. He moved farther along, listening, watching. From back across the canyon came the chattering wail of a coyote. A wild-cat, hunting along a ledge, snarled at the shadow of an owl, which passed silently overhead.

Tex moved out to the edge, where he leaned on some broken sandstone, looking into the dark depths of the canyon. It was part of an ancient window. Hundreds of years ago a skin-clad warrior may have stood in that same spot, watching for an enemy—or a friend, and listening to the ancestors of that same coyote and wild-cat. Tier on tier stood the old dwellings, their old walls sheer into the canyon.

Sally could be in any of them, but Tex felt that she was close. Her captor would not be doing much wandering in the dark. He called her name, but there was no response. They had probably gagged her.

He moved slowly around a projection, feeling with his feet for safe footing, and his toe struck a yielding object. Cautiously he lighted a watch and looked down into the eyes of Sally, bound and gagged, sitting on the floor, her back against the ancient masonry.

It was only a matter of moments, until

she was untied, the gag removed.

"Tex, I heard you!" she gasped. "I heard you call for the men. And then I heard you call my name. I knew you'd come—if you could. Where are the other men?"

"There aren't any, Sally," he said gently. "It was just a trick. I came alone."

"Alone? But Tex, that man said they were bringing you here, too, if you were still alive. When no one came he got worried. He kept me farther down the canyon, until it got dark. He was afraid things were going bad, so he brought me up here. He untied my feet and made me walk. He said he knew a way up to the top of the cliffs, but he couldn't find it in the dark. Just before he heard you, he told me he was going to leave me here."

Sally was almost hysterical in her talk. Tex quieted her and told her what happened at the ranch. Corbin's confession had cleared him of any guilt in the shooting at the Casino.

"Oh, I'm so glad, Tex, so glad," she said. "I came back to the ranch, thinking you might be there, and I walked right into those men. They didn't hurt me. But you stopped the sheep, Tex. You saved Broken Bow Valley. They should reward you for that. If it hadn't been for you—"

"Savin' the valley and you, Sally—that's enough reward."

They sat there in the darkness, talking of things and people.

"Tex, I believe I've figured out about the letters," Sally said. "Tommy James worked at the post office, and he was Chuck's friend. Maybe he destroyed the letters."

"Where is Tommy James now, Sally?"

"Oh, he's been gone two years. He could have destroyed them. He and Chuck were close friends. Oh, Chuck could do the most despicable things!"

"Sally," said Tex gently, "I've never told anybody else, but I believe Chuck robbed that train. He stole my ring and wore it."

"Tex! You mean—you served three years—for Chuck?"

"Well, yuh see," said Tex quietly, "I told our mother I'd kind of look after him, and—well, that's the way it was."

"And he let you do it," she whispered.

"It's all right, Sally. Let's forget it. He's havin' his troubles."

The moon swung farther out over the canyon, and a chill breeze whispered through the old ruins. Tex's arm crept around Sally, and they sat there. After awhile she slept, exhausted from her experiences. Tex slept, too. He wasn't afraid of anyone now. They could go home in the morning. It wasn't over three miles to the ranch.

Then he awoke, chilled, staring around. It was daylight. His eyes shifted to the old walls, the piles of broken rubble. Across from him was part of an old wall, which had recently fallen down, and not over six feet away, looking over a chunk of the broken wall, was a human skull, leering at him. Tex shut his eyes, opened them again, but the skull was still there. It had some hair on it, too, hair that lifted in the breeze.

"You ain't exactly pretty," remarked Tex.

His words awoke Sally, who straightened up quickly and glanced around.

"Where on earth!" she exclaimed, and looked at Tex.

"I didn't know where I was," she said huskily. Tex laughed and pointed at the skull.

"Do you see what's lookin' at us?" he asked.

"Oh, mercy!" she exclaimed. "It's—it's horrible, Tex! Why, it's a skull!"

Tex flexed his cramped muscles, got to his feet and went over. It was not only a skull, but the rest of the skeleton, plus shreds of clothing, a cartridge belt, warped and twisted, a rusty six-shooter in a holster, two boots, green and twisted.

"Sally!" said Tex huskily. "Come here!"

She came gingerly and looked. There was not only the skeleton of a man, but in the rubble were two canvas sacks, still sealed, and a canvas-covered package. Sally stared at Tex, who had dropped to his knees and picked up a skeleton hand, detached. On a bony finger was a ring. Tex stared down at it. Sally almost screamed;

"Tex! That's your ring!"

"Yeah," he whispered in amazement. "My ring. Yeah, it shore is."

"Sam Howard," said Sally. "Sam Howard."

"Huh?" Tex looked up at her. "Sam Howard?"

"Look at that front tooth!" she whispered. "Remember? Sam had it broken off on an angle. He went to Phoenix and had it fixed. Half gold. Tex, that is Sam Howard. And we thought he went away."

SLOWLY Tex got to his feet, slightly dazed.

"Sam Howard—Chuck's friend," he muttered. "Same height. He stole my ring—and I blamed Chuck. Sally, that last shot the express messenger fired hit Sam. He got here—and died. Why, Sally, I'm cleared! Sam Howard robbed that train!"

"Listen!" interrupted Sally. From down in the canyon came sounds. It was the posse.

Tex ran to the edge and yelled at them. He waved his hat, and they saw him. There were at least a dozen men in the posse, and Uncle Toby was at the head. They came piling up over the rocks, laughing and talking, when the word had been passed that Sally was safe. They crowded into the old dwelling, asking questions, shaking hands with each other and patting Tex on the back.

They were very quiet as they watched the

sheriff examine the skeleton. The canvas bundle was currency, all intact, and the two sacks of gold had never been opened. They recognized the skeleton as Sam Howard. The broken tooth, repaired with gold, was positive identification. Uncle Toby nudged Tex.

"We got Chuck in Eagle City last night," said Toby. "He confessed his part in the sheep deal. We gave him until daylight to get out of the valley and never come back."

Tex nodded. Some of the men who had been on the jury which convicted Tex were in that posse.

They didn't know what to say.

"We're startin' all over again," Tex said. "I don't blame anybody."

"Them blasted sheep men!" blurted Hooty McClung. "I'd like to—"

"No, Hooty," interrupted Tex. "In spite of all they tried to do—I like 'em a whole lot. If they hadn't come—!" Tex pointed at the skeleton.

"I reckon we understand," said the sheriff. "Without them sheep men, you'd never have found the evidence. Broken Bow Valley folks owe you a lot, Tex—more than they'll ever be able to pay. This is the first time in my life I ever felt kindly toward sheep."

"You take Sally to my place, Tex," Uncle Toby said to Tex. "There's extra hosses down the canyon. We'll handle everythin' else. Yuh might tell Aunt Emmeline that I'm stoppin' in Eagle City, and I'm goin' to have the biggest drink of liquor in the place. And yuh can tell her that she won't need to do any sniffin' at me when I get home, 'cause I admit it ahead of time."

"I'll prepare her for the odor," grinned Tex, and Sally and he went down the rocks together.

Hooty McClung, Miracle Jones and Dude McKee stood against the old wall and watched Tex help Sally over the bad places. In fact, most of it seemed bad to Tex. Hooty grinned and shook his head.

"I'm shore glad we done homage to that feller," he said.

They grinned at each other, and went back to help the sheriff.

COMING NEXT ISSUE

# THE DUDE WRANGLER

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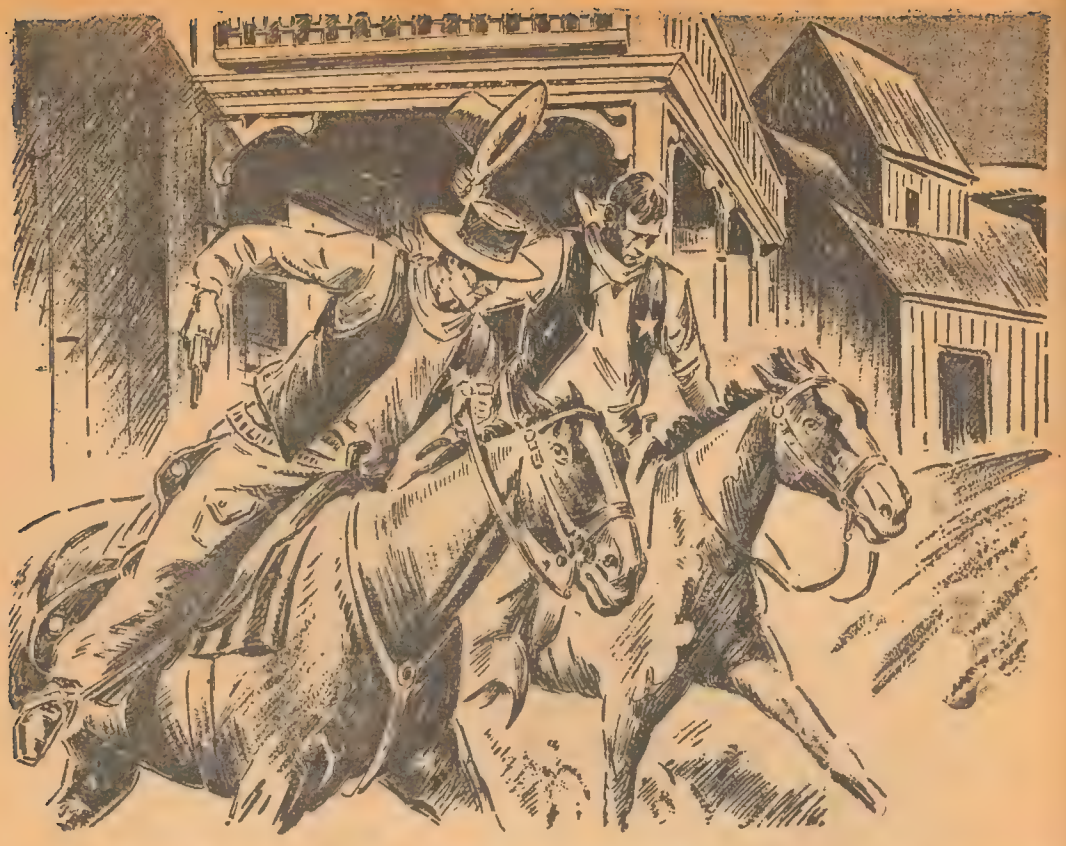


# LAW IN HIS BLOOD

## By T. W. FORD

*When a Rancher Is Murdered and Lynch-Law Rules Wagon Tongue, Ben Trace Faces Thundering Irons to Side an Accused Pard!*

### CHAPTER I

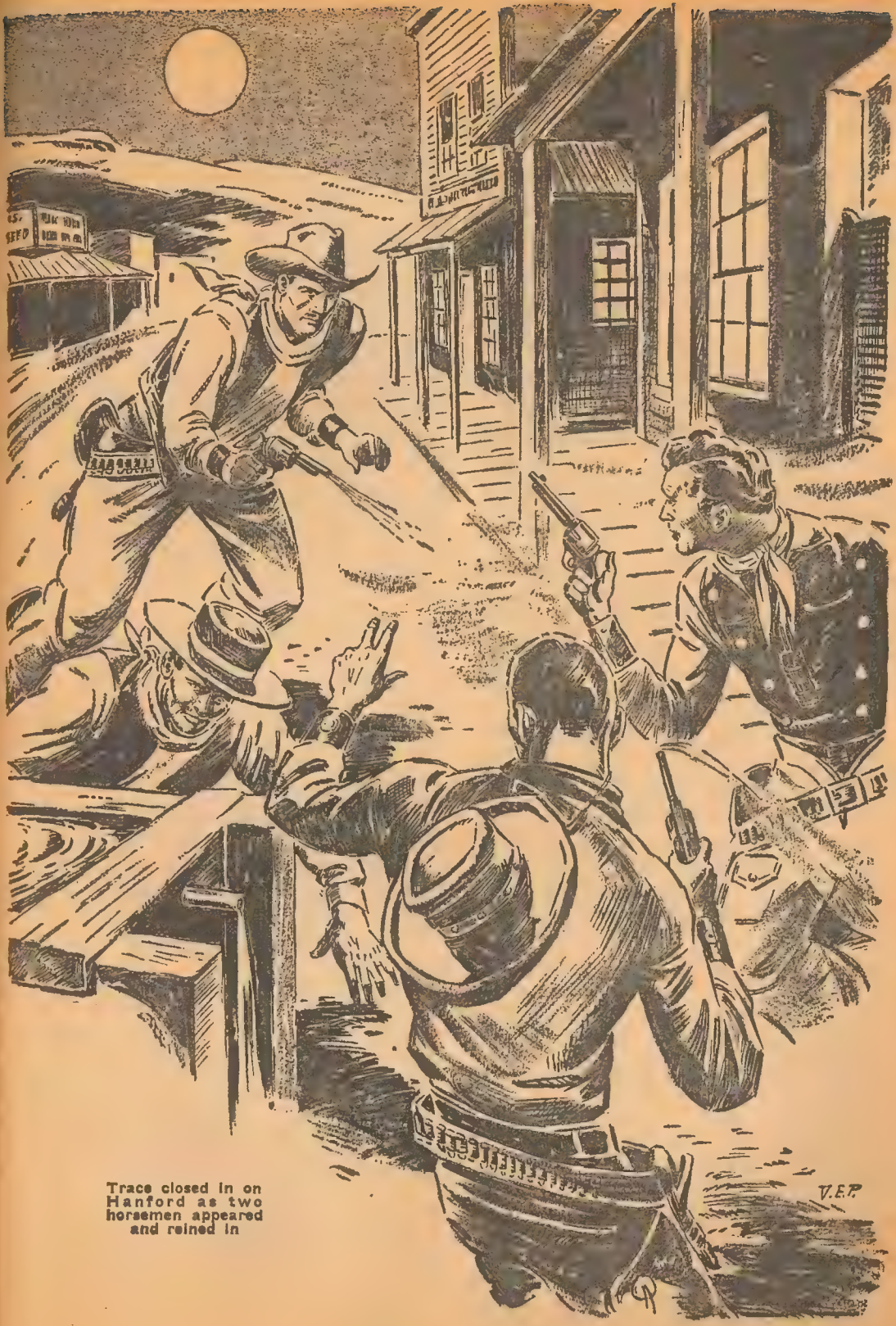
*Yellow Streak*

HE called himself Trace, Ben Trace. But around Wagon Tongue, they had other ideas. Somehow it got whispered around that he was Cudlip, the outlaw, broken and busted, living out his days like a whipped dog since the night Marshal Lang caught up to him in Brownsville. There had been a lot of mystery about what happened that night. But later word drifted down that it would have been better for Wild Dan Cudlip if Lang had drilled him dead.

Nobody on the Wagon Tongue range actually knew anything about Trace. He minded his own affairs, was curtly reticent. He came into town once or twice a month for his supplies, had a few quick silent drinks at the Last Stop, and headed home. He'd bought the old Tussard place, a two-bit outfit, up on Crazy Squaw Creek. Lived there with the tall soft-faced man who just sat on the gallery gazing off into space and dragged a half-paralyzed leg when it was necessary to move.

They said that was one of Cudlip's old bunch who'd been shot up and was living out his days with him. Cudlip had always had

A COMPLETE QUICK-TRIGGER NOVELET



Trace closed in on Hanford as two horsemen appeared and reined in

the reputation of sticking by any of his men.

But Cudlip—or Trace, as he preferred to call himself now—was just another rannihan who'd come to one moment in his life when he got up against something too tough for him.

That "something" being B. T. Lang, the dead-shot marshal. So they told it in Wagon Tongue.

And they said, "I told you so" when they saw his nerve break that time in the Last Stop. He'd just clambered down from his buckboard, loaded up with supplies, nodded to Lonquist who was crossing the street from the other side. Both he and Lonquist, the town sawbones, were wearing flat-crowned gray sombreros. That was what did it. Coming first, the taciturn Trace stepped under the wooden awning and trotted quickly up the flat steps to the batwing doors of the side entrance of the place. Hanford, peeping over the top of the batwings, sighted the gray hat and took it for Lonquist and eased to the side. It was a practical joke he planned.

Then the tall stringy-bodied Trace shoved through the split doors and Hanford jumped out and shoved a gun in his side. "Pick yourself a piece of ceiling, mister!" he blurted in his always loud voice. "Fork over your roll!"

Without a jerk, with no sign, eyes simply twisting sidewise in his flat face, Trace looked around and down on him. Hanford was bull big with shoulders fitted for ramming down a barn door. But he was an inch or so shorter than Trace. Trace looked down as if he were something a gila monster wouldn't waste spit on.

"Get that gun off me, mister, before I kill you," Trace answered. He said it softly yet somehow there was iron behind the words. Iron that struck with cold harshness on the atmosphere and weighted it with threat.

THE brick hue of Hanford's face was turned to the shade of gully wash. His big jaw moved silently. Then he lowered the gun, the muzzle sliding down as if the strength had gone from his wrist. He still seemed unable to speak under the battery of Trace's unblinking faded eyes.

"Thanks, mister," Trace said. "A man's dead a long time." Imperturbably he walked on to the bar, ordering a drink. Only Clem Smith the bar boss noticed how his face was coated with sweat film. Trace's hand seemed rock steady as he poured himself a shot of whisky.

Talk began again. The breed over in the corner took up the drowsy strumming of his banjo once more. Life seemed to come back into the air of the place. Gold-toothed Clem Smith started to say how it was a joke. But Trace shook his head a scant half-inch.

"There's nothing funny about a six-gun—ever," he said. There was no answer to that.

The burly Hanford, customarily jovial and breezy, said nothing for a spell. He rejoined his friends at the bar, drank, and watched the blue smoke twisting up from his stogie. Just once he skinned his eyes down the line at Trace. Trace stood staring straight ahead as if nothing had occurred, an obviously young man but with something old beneath the skin of his face and hair prematurely shot with splinters of gray. He bought another drink. He acted as if he didn't know Hanford was alive, much less in the same room.

Hanford, a newcomer to town, had said he was a horse rancher waiting for his partner to come through from the south with some new stuff he'd bought. He was a loud-talking, loud-laughing amiable fellow, free with his dinero at the bar. He seemed to pack plenty of it on him. His left wrist was bandaged. Said it happened over at Anderson's Station in a bar when some deputies tried to jump Stub Dowsey, the outlaw. As everybody knew, Dowsey had been operating in those parts lately.

It was funny, the way Hanford told it. "There I was, a couple of sheets to the wind, having a time on that chunk of dinero I'd won at faro," he said. "Me, I'm feeling great, buying drinks for the bar and shoutin' around. And all the time there's this quiet gent down at the end of the bar, saying nothing to nobody. Shucks, I figured he was just some trail bum riding the grub line. Then the doors bust open and the three deputies come in a-yelling for this Dowsey to surrender. And this quiet gent has his hands filled afore you can spit—and is smoking his way out. He was Dowsey, the feller I picked for a two-bit saddle tramp. Haw-haw! And pardner, did I dive under a table fast!"

His wrist had been nicked by a stray slug in the melee.

He began laughing again now. Fat red-headed Hagen, another newcomer to town, had just breasted the front doors. Another man, known as Burdee, came out of the back and sat down at a table and began to deal a solitaire layout. Hanford let his eyes run over those two, then went into a story about a time a card sharp licked him for fifty dollars at cutting a deck. And he got talking about Dowsey the outlaw again.

"Of course, he's playing a losing game," he opined loudly. "They'll catch up with him, some tough John Law any night, maybe. He'll force Dowsey to smoke it out. And Dowsey'll either get himself a ride to Boothill on a shutter or have his nerve busted—like some hombres I could mention. Har-har!"

He waved to Clem to set them up for his

group. But he was looking directly at Trace all the time. It was evident that he'd heard the rumors about how Trace was actually Cudlip.

"Yeah, I heard about this lobo, Cudlip, who went yellow," he snorted. "He's an example. Big talker. Always boasted about how tough he was. But when that B.T. Lang cornered him and let him know the chips was down—well, what happened? As you and me all know, Cudlip crawled! Yeah, crawled!"

He was watching Trace again. Hanford guffawed, raising his voice another notch. "Set up another round, Clem. . . . Sure. Cudlip ate crow and showed the stripe an' quit like a dog! That's what he did, by grab!"

Everybody in the bar knew what was going on. They were waiting to see how much this Ben Trace would take. Not that anybody really expected him to do anything. He'd probably just leave. Then he surprised them all by calmly shoving a bill across the bar and having another. He put his hat on the counter beside him. He looked like a gent prepared to stay a spell.

Hanford grew more boisterous. And more insulting. But Trace appeared as impervious to it as a deaf man. Half a dozen freighters came in for a quick one and Trace moved closer to Hanford's party to make room. It was a few minutes after the freighters that Hanford forced a showdown.

"Yes-siree, boys, I've mixed 'round them gents of the lobo breed just enough to know," he was proclaiming. "And the great pack of 'em—the general run—they're tin-horns and dead-beats who're brassy as all get-out when they got their bunch at their backs and a shootin'-iron in some poor devil's middle. But when they're faced with an even break and a jasper without his hands tied—then they hunt their holes like skulkin' coyotes and—" He had just bought more drinks. Glass half-raised, he pawed at his change, bills and silver, on the bar. "Hey, I had another ten-spot there, by gosh!"

CLEM protested he had given him correct change, said maybe it had fallen to the floor. Hanford waved him silent, setting down his drink.

"I reckon I know what happened to that money." He wadded his thumbs in his shell-belt, staring at Trace. "Do you know, Trace?"

The long-bodied Trace twisted his eyes around. "Are you saying I do, mister?"

"Now maybe I am. Maybe I'm doing more than just hinting that—"

"He never put a hand near your dinero, Hanford!"

It was Young Brady talking. Nobody had noticed him come in the side door a minute or so before. He was scarcely more than a younker, a rawboned bold-faced kid, son of old "Tiger" Brady who'd left him the Box B up to the north. Young Brady had been a bit of a wild hellion but had settled down to the job of operating the outfit since his dad's death. Though hot-tempered, he had a ready grin with a hint of the Devil in his eyes and everybody liked him. Now he stood at the far end of the bar counter, arms folded across the front of his fancy blue silk shirt with the silver buttons. He was a great kid for duding up.

"Who asked you for your two-cents?" Hanford snorted.

"I saw him. Trace never touched your money," Young Brady came back firmly. "He hasn't moved."

Trace spoke to him then. "This is my game, kid. You can't buy chips. Thanks." He gave him a quick smile. Then he was abruptly around and facing burly Hanford without seeming to make it fast. "Don't go no further, mister! No man can call me a thief."

"I'm missing ten!" Hanford expectorated a yellow stream on the spur-scuffed floor. "You was standing right next to my money. You could of slipped your hand under your hat and done it.

"You're naming me a two-bit packrat of a thief?" Trace's voice was no more than a loud whisper.

"Take it as you want," Hanford bellowed, "you lily-livered washed-up tramp! By grab—"

He made the first move for his twin guns with their bone handles and got them half out of their tied-down scabbards.

Some of the men around grabbed Hanford then. Kept his guns pinned down. They felt sorry for Trace, the ex-outlaw, as they'd pity any man who'd lost his nerve. Big-chested Hagen had a gun half-drawn too. At the table, Burdee's hands had disappeared from sight beneath the top. Then everybody realized Trace had his big Colts navy revolver out, sitting level in his hand. He'd had it clear and cocked for some seconds.

"Lemme at him!" Hanford was raging as he was held, interspersing it with oaths. "I'll whittle that no-good tramp down to size!"

Trace cut in. "No man can call me what you have, Hanford," he said passionlessly. He motioned toward the door and the road beyond it. "You can pull your pin and get out of town or—"

"Or what?" thundered Hanford.

"Or I'll be coming round that corner up the line in ten minutes. If you're still in town, I'll shoot on sight, Hanford." He turned on a heel and strode out.

Wagon Tongue was dumbfounded. Trace was supposed to be the one-time outlaw

who'd lost his nerve. Yet he had called for the showdown when he could have walked out. Now, Hanford had no choice!

## CHAPTER II

### *Drygulched!*

OUTSIDE the main road was cleared, deserted save for the eyes watching from behind shutters or almost-closed doors. A yellow-spotted hound came out of an alley but vanished when a man whistled hurriedly to it. At the main corners where the General Store and the bank and the big saloon where Clem Smith consulted his thick gold-cased watch.

"A mite over ten minutes now," he announced. "They ought to be here."

Trace's flat Sphinxlike face appeared around the end of the building forming the corner up the line. He turned into the middle of the empty road, striding slowly yet purposefully. Beneath hunched shoulders his hands were hooked in his cartridge belt. His boots left little puffs of alkali floating in his wake. The clink of his spurs sounded clearly on the stillness.

Hanford came and looked over the half-leaf front doors of the barroom, sighting the approaching Trace and scowling. Hanford downed the shot of whisky he held, coughing and flushing up. Just before he had been speaking privately with red-headed Hagen, who now was waiting across the road, close into the buildings. Burdee had vanished right after Ben Trace left the Last Stop.

Hanford wiped his mouth and stepped out, loosening his weapons in the holsters. He stood in the shadow of the wooden awning, watching Trace come.

The group at the main corners, began to edge back behind the saloon building. Peering out, they saw Trace halt briefly in mid-stride when he spotted Hanford edging forward. "Get out in the middle of the road," Trace called and came on again.

Not thirty paces separated the pair. It would come any time. A gust of sultry wind twisted in from the browned grass of the range, kicking up the powdered dust of the street. In another instant both men were blotted from sight in the dancing cloud of alkali. "Watch that Hagen!" Young Brady snapped to those around him. "He's up to something."

Then the gust of wind was gone, carrying its front of alkali out the other end of the town. And the antagonists were revealed, crouched, arms upthrust before their faces. Hanford had sidled over behind a tree. He moved out from its cover reluctantly but advanced no further, standing rooted with hands clamped over his holsters.

Suddenly it was done with, over. Trace was diagonally across the road from Hanford. A man, crouched just inside the big door of the blacksmith's barn, caught the low-spoken words Trace said, half to himself.

"It isn't worth killing for," Trace muttered.

Then he half turned and went by the horse trough at the roadside and into an alley.

It was so unexpected it left everybody frozen and gasping. Hanford, too. For a long moment they were all struck dumb.

One moment Ben Trace was there, poised and deadly. The next, he was gone. Then Hanford's triumphant guffaw smashed out.

Before anybody had a chance to even talk about it, hoofs drummed down the side road. Hawk-faced Vince Delcarte, owner of the Double Stirrup, rode into sight at the head of a handful of his hard-case ranch hands. His sombrero flopped on his shoulders behind his shock of white hair. As he picked out Young Brady in the group at the corner, his face flamed with temper. He stabbed an accusing arm at Brady.

"By Godfrey, Brady, I've had enough of your high-handed tricks," Delcarte sang out. "You can't go on forever accusing me of being a sneakin' rustler and my men of cutting fences! I've had enough of your upstart lip!"

He hit the ground and advanced on bandy legs, bristling with belligerence.

Brady had already come around, boyish face set grimly.

"Those men of yours was on my land last Tuesday, Delcarte! And like I told you, when they cross my line, they do it at their own risk! That's it with the bark off. An' if you don't like it, you can go to blazes."

The other threatened gun duel was forgotten for the moment. Nobody thought of following Trace, who'd eaten crow, then. Back in the old days there had been some feuding between Brady's father and Delcarte. But matters had been ultimately patched up after a few killings as the country quieted down.

Then a couple of months ago it had broken out anew between Delcarte and Young Brady over a fence-line up to the north. Bad feeling had been mounting with counter-charges of rustling and brand-blotting. And then, during the last week, while Delcarte had been driving a herd to the shipping point the other side of the pass, there had been a water-hole brush between some Brady hands and Double

Stirrup men. Young Brady himself had nicked Delcarte's segundo.

It looked as if the bad blood of old was due to come to a head again.

"Telling me where I can head in, huh, you young whipper-snapper!" Delcarte yelled. "Blast it, we can settle this here and now." His gnarled hands dropped toward his gun butts.

YOUNG BRADY edged his legs wider and reached toward his own holster. The sun glittered off the silver buttons of his fancy shirt.

"Name what you want, Delcarte!"

Clem Smith, the respected saloon proprietor, side-tracked trouble then. He stepped smack between the two antagonists and then faced Delcarte, grinning. Speaking low-toned he told the latter Young Brady had been drinking, and that he knew Vince Delcarte wouldn't want the blood of any gray-eyed younker on his hands. He put his arm around the old rancher's shoulders and steered him in the side door. Meanwhile a couple of his friends, at a signal from Smith, had swung Brady around and were leading him off the other way.

"Hey, what happened to Trace?" somebody wanted to know.

"Where did that yellow snake crawl to?" the swaggering Hanford roared down the main street.

Coming along from the other end, Burdee shook his head . . .

It was sometime after nightfall when Ben Trace reappeared in Wagon Tongue, swinging in off the trail that ran along the desert edge to the west. He wanted to get "Doc" Lonquist to come out and see his crippled friend at the ranch. Trace cut onto the main street and found it crowded with excited riders gathering at the head of the livery stable alley. He asked questions.

A one-legged old timer told him about it. Vince Delcarte had been found shot in the back out on the north trail. Also he had been robbed of the dinero, more than two thousand dollars, which he had brought back with him after selling that last herd. And Young Brady was obviously the killer. A silver button from his fancy blue shirt was found beside the corpse. And he had been spotted riding hell-for-leather down the southbound trail that skirted the desert.

"Sure looks like Young Brady lost his head," a man opined sadly. "Of course, it's well known he was hard-pressed for cash. But gunning a man in the back—it'll have his pop, Old Tiger, spinning in his grave for sure!"

"No question but it was him! The deadwood's hung on him for fair. And he ain't got much chance of getting away!"

A rider had already pounded up the east trail to the railroad spur where the telegraph office was. Word would be wired to Galbraith, the other side of the desert. So if Brady tried to cross the desert, they'd be waiting for him.

"And the boys'll push straight south. They'll be bound to pick up his sign!"

"And when they do—" An old-timer shifted his crutches to indicate a loop across his throat. "—well, they'll save us the trouble of a trial."

Vince Delcarte had been a highly-respected man in the country, a square-shooter and a man who always paid his debts.

"Who found Delcarte's body?" Trace said quietly.

"That red-headed gent, Hagen. He'd headed out for Elson City and then come on Delcarte and returned with the news . . . Nope, it's all over with Young Brady. He crosses the desert, they grab him. He cain't stay out on that waste with nothin' big enough to shade a lizard. And if he keeps on south, he's a goner."

There was a lot of yelling down by the livery barn. Hanford was hopping around the mounted men as they milled, promising to buy the bar for the gent who plugged that drygulching coyote of a Brady. The pursuing party set out for the southbound trail to the accompaniment of cheers. Nobody noticed Ben Trace turn out behind the buildings of the road and also head for the desert. At the edge of the town he paused to pick up a pair of filled leather water bags at the Mexican dobie shack.

Then he was gone.

## CHAPTER III

### *Facing It Out*

UNDER the early risen moon, after Ben Trace had put a strip of mesquite between himself and the town, he rode at a steady hand-lope. At times he drew up on the trackless dunes to pick out a landmark. A stark chimney butte here. A shallow gully where the wind had scraped the yellow sand clear of a rocky cut. His usually emotionless face was stamped with purpose now. Once he brought out a small burnished piece of metal that no man knew he toted ony longer. When he paused to let his dun horse lap brackish water from a tiny pothole, he adjusted the .38 in the shoulder holster under the faded hickory shirt. He hoped he wouldn't have occasion to use it because he was certain the Brady

kid was innocent.

He angled off to the southwest where lava outcropping looked blue under the moon.

"That Brady was a smart one," he muttered half-aloud. "He wouldn't try to cross to the other side of the desert. He's finding himself a hideout." That was what he was betting on. "But what he's forgetting is that by fleeing he's branding himself a lobo for life. . . ."

It was an hour or so before daybreak when he dropped over the other side of a sandy crest to where a narrow rock-sided defile tunneled into the desert floor. The entrance to it was almost completely hidden by saguaro cacti that stood like ghostly sentinels in the half-light under the now smudgy stars above. The rising wind had obliterated any hoof-prints that might have been there.

Trace dropped off, leading his pony carefully down the rocky bottom of the defile. Inside of twenty paces it seemed to pinch off. But when he edged his way around the sharp-angled turn in the defile there, it broadened so two or three men easily could have ridden abreast. As they had in the past, Trace knew.

Little scraps of vegetation doted the defile at the base of its stony walls. He couldn't see them in the pitlike darkness with the sky barely a crooked seam overhead. But he knew they were there. The air had a moister feel to it, too.

Then he had left his bronc ground-anchored in his rear and was creeping ahead cautiously. In the stillness there was the clear crack of an ember and a refracted beam of firelight glowed on one of the polished walls an instant. Hunched, Trace inched toward another twist. Then a small loose stone spurted out from under his boot and rattled into a sink-hole. From around the bend came the whinny of a horse and the quick scuffle of a man's feet. Ben Trace swore to himself as he realized he had lost his chance to slip in, unheard.

"Brady!" he sang out. "I know you're there. Come out with your hands up. In the name of the Law!"

A bird fluttered from a bush in a crack of the side wall. Then it was very still for some time. Finally Young Brady's reply came in a tight defiant voice.

"All right. I'm here. But you can come in and get me, hang you! Try it and the buzzards'll have your skeleton picked clean 'fore the sun is up, by grab! I ain't giving up without a fight!"

"It's me, Ben Trace. And I don't want to kill you or—"

"Trace?" Brady's laughter, bitter and harsh, rattled off the walls from inside the hollow ahead. "What the devil do you mean, in the name of the Law, Cudlip?"

"Or die myself," Trace went on calmly. "But I'm going to take you prisoner. So you might as well surrender easy."

"Spit in dust and you'll have mud!" the hidden Brady shot back, a typical younker backed to the wall and trying to be double tough. "Come in here with your hardware out and you'll have blood, Cudlip!"

"Are you guilty, Brady?"

Again there was a long pause. Then: "No! Shucks, no. I'd sooner fry in a furnace than've shot that old hardshell in the back!"

"Then come back an' face 'em, Brady! Only a guilty man flees like a sneakin' coyote from a down cow. You're innocent and shouldn't fear."

Once more Young Brady's sarcastic bitter-tinged laughter spattered along the defile. "I've heard of innocent men dancing on air at the end of a hang-rope before. Come and get me!"

After that it was silent for a long time. Trace backtracked between the precipitous walls and spoke no more. Overhead the segment of sky lightened and became faintly tinged with a saffron hue. In the hollow at the end of the defile, a mammoth pothole churned out long ago by the forces of nature, Young Brady shifted his position back of a rock by a clump of sparse brush. He poked with a gun muzzle at the small mound of shells laid in readiness before him and rubbed his lips. The inside of his mouth was parched with the tension of waiting.

"Well, what's holding you up, Cudlip?" he cried out once. "Trying to figure out if the probable bounty money is worth risking your skin for, huh?"

His only answer was the echoes from the defile. Brady stuck out his boyish jaw grimly, knowing he had no more chance of getting out alive with a man watching the other end of the gulch than Ben Trace had of getting in. He speculatively eyed the package of grub he'd picked up en route, some stale Dutch oven bread and strips of jerked beef.

THERE was a barely audible rustle. Brady twisted half-around but could see nothing. Then Trace's voice seemed to materialize out of thin air from over on the left somewhere, dry and authoritative.

"Get shed of your guns, Brady! You're covered!"

Brady flung himself flat, rolling behind a small hummock. One of his Colts slashed powder flame from its wheeling muzzle blindly. In response Trace's gun seemed to erupt from six feet up on the side of the pothole hollow out of solid rock. It sent a horneting slug that cut through the brim of Brady's sombrero.

But the young man packed nerve, plenty of it. He slammed two shots at the place

where the bullet had come, leaped away, and dodged sideward behind the trunk of a scrub oak. Ground mist was seeping up from the spring that broke surface in the middle of the hollow as the temperature changed with the daylight. The mist half-blanketed him. Swearing in hoarse desperation, he fired twice more with one weapon.

"I'm sorry," Trace's voice carried across the hollow.

Then the report of his gun stamped a period to the words like a blow. The bullet knifed the left leg of the besieged Brady and sent him spinning backward. His Colts flew from his hands as he tried to right himself.

Trace's head and shoulders emerged from a small hole up beside an overhanging bulge of rock on the hollow wall. He knelt on a narrow shelf there. His heavy pistol was leveled, his .32 half drawn from the shoulder rig inside his shirt. Pain-torn Brady sighted him and, still nervy, dived toward one of his fallen guns.

"Don't!" Trace barked. "I'm a dead shot, boy . . . And I guarantee that when I bring you back, nobody's putting a hemp slip-noose on you till you been proved guilty."

It was that last that halted the kid and made him pause. Trace drew the rest of his body into sight, slung his legs over the ledge, and dropped to the hollow floor. He had Brady covered all the time. Red ran from Trace's left forearm where a wild shot of the fugitive's had nicked him. Trace seemed unaware of it. He marched over, brusquely ordered Brady to turn his back, ran over him expertly for a hideout weapon, kicked the fallen guns well out of reach.

"Too bad you didn't know about the tunnel, younker. An old stream hollowed out this place. A branch of it went underground back in the defile and made a tunnel into here. Squat and I'll take a look at that hurt leg of yours."

"How'd you know about this place?" Brady demanded sullenly.

"In the old days, Dutchman Schuler and his bunch used to use it as a hideout. Put your claws behind you. You ain't got much sense, so I reckon I'd better tie you up."

"So you used to ride with the Schuler bunch, eh?"

"No," said Ben Trace bluntly. "Want a smoke?"

Brady tried to put a sneer in his forced unsteady laughter. "Well, you'll sure be a big hombre when you drag me in, Cudlip."

Trace interrupted coldly. "Ain't interested in that. You claim you're innocent. So I'm making you go back and face 'em and smoke the guilty coyote out of his hole."

"Yeah? Why you lyin'—"

"Just one thing. How'd you know Vince Delcarte had his chips cashed? Who warned you to flee?" He already had the kid's trouser leg up and was studying the shallow flesh wound.

Something in the matter-of-factness of Trace's tone robbed Young Brady of his defiant rancor. He told how he'd been riding up to the fork of the north trail after being over to the setlement to spark a girl.

"Then that feller, Burdee, he come around the bend and tipped me off."

"Burdee, eh . . ."

Over on the western horizon, the next day, there was a vermilion splotch where the sun had been before it dipped beyond the rim. Purple tongues of shadow were already creeping out from buildings and objects along the usually somnolent road. Some of the pursuing cowboys had already drifted back into Wagon Tongue with news. There was no sign of Young Brady. Not southward, anyway, for if he had crossed the desert he would have been picked up at Galbraith and word would have come in.

"We got fresh mounts down at Knox Crossing like we planned," one of the returned men said. "Rode hell-for-leather most of the way. Met up with plenty of gents on the south trail, too. And none of 'em had cut hair nor hide of Brady. It had been raining down that way, too. So if there'd been track, we'd have found it. But there was none."

HANFORD was pounding the bar at the Last Stop. "Well, maybe he doubled around and hit up north," he declared. "The point is, he ain't at his ranchhouse and he ain't showed in town. He's fled—which proves he's guilty as the devil! And the thing to do is catch him to deal out justice!" He paused to refill his glass. "Outside of anything else, the money was gone from Descarte's dead body, and Young Brady is gone from the country!"

"That's right, Hanford!" said red-headed Hagen stoutly. "No gettin' away from them facts."

"We can organize another posse," Hanford said.

Down at the edge of Wagon Tongue, Trace rode back through the dusk from a house where he had talked with a man. He drew a Bowie blade and slashed the rawhide binding Young Brady's wrists. "You give me your word you won't try to escape, Brady?"

The youth stared for some seconds, unable to answer. Trace was evidently keeping his promise not to take him in just to see him hung. Brady's head jerked up and down.

"You got my word. But why're you doing this, Cudlip?"

"Maybe I just got an old itch to see the law carried out. Now, get this. You never

high-tailed it—or tried to—out of the country. You was just up in the hills combing the hogbacks for strays." He leaned closer and went on speaking rapidly, accenting his instructions by banging the saddle horn with the heel of his hand.

They finally rode up the road to the heart of the town. A little beyond the glow of the light from the Smith barroom, Young Brady dropped to the ground and took the guns Trace handed him.

"Run a stiff bluff," Trace said.

A few moments later, Hanford was snorting, "We'll form another hunting party and get him."

The big front batwing doors of the place were pushed open. Young Brady stood in the doorway, sombrero perched jauntily on his head, arms akimbo with his hands on his gun butts.

"Howdy, gents," he said easily, playing it out just as Ben Trace had ordered. "I got word folks was looking for me. So I came right in. What's it all about, gents?"

## CHAPTER IV

### *Six-Gun Showdown*

AT FIRST, they stared at him as if he were a phantom. His boyish face twitched once. Then he had control again, letting his eyes run over them carelessly. All talking had stopped like a thread broken off. Some of the men backed away. Hanford had sputtered over his last swallow of whisky and his cigar stub fell from his hands. He went bug-eyed, staring. Then he let out a bellow as he checked on Hagen easing over to one wall at the side.

"By gosh, you got a nerve showing your face in these parts, Brady, you back-shooting killer! It's a swell bluff you're running! But you ain't fooling me—or any other gent here! Is he, gents?" He was inching his hands gunward.

Brady said, "I haven't killed anybody—much less shot 'em in the back. Who saw me do it?"

That last question crackled on the electric atmosphere. "Well, killers usually take care to strike when no witnesses are clutterin' up the landscape," Dr. Lonquist said gravely.

"Sure!" Hanford roared. "Why don't he ask us to show him the blood on his hands? Or maybe he wants the poor dead devil to lift his voice from the grave and call him by name, huh?"

"Where you been all this time, Brady?" Clem Smith asked.

Brady said, as Trace had told him to, that he'd been combing the hogbacks for strays. Hanford guffawed and other men began to press forward.

"Sure, sure. Nice story. And a nice lonesome place to hide the dinero stolen from the dead man, too, boys! He went alone, too, so nobody would see what he was doing that time, either. What in blazes are we waiting for? We sure got a spare piece of manila rope in the town, ain't we, gents?"

"Nobody's got you hogtied, Hanford!" Brady snapped.

Hanford screwed his face into an ugly grin. "You aiming to take on the whole town, Brady? All the guns in this room? You'd ruther be shot down than stretch rope, eh?"

"Mebbeso he just aims to make sure the right gent is strung up, Hanford." Ben Trace said that. He stood down at the corner of the bar, having entered the side door. He had jack-knifed his long body beneath them without stirring them so that nobody had seen him come. His presence was a shock.

Especially so to Hanford. His head jumped around and his face purpled with rage. "Why you lily-livered dog, what're you cutting in for?"

It was the way Trace's Colts jumped into his hand that shut off Hanford. Trace went on in that flat voice that sliced through everything.

"Young Brady hasn't been around, so you condemn him. But where were you, Hanford, around the time Delcarte must've been cut down?"

Hanford spat yellow juice, smirked around the room. "Well, I don't just know. Seems now like I might've been catching some shuteye over to my room. Or—hey, are you accusing me?"

Trace, face bland, nodded toward Hagen over by the wall.

"Where was he? Hagen says he found the shot man. A coincidence, wasn't it? The killer could've ridden back and said the same thing."

Hagen spat curses. Hanford shouted that this yellow-livered ex-outlaw was trying to trick them.

"By grab, maybe he had a hand in it? Where was he?"

Trace smiled coldly and said his bunkhands, both of them, could prove he was out at his place.

"And where was Burdee, another stranger to these parts, gentlemen?" Trace asked. "Out on the trail somewheres. He even came across Young Brady and warned him to jump the country. Nice of him, wasn't it? Maybe he didn't have no motive for

doing it, huh?" Cannily he planted the seeds of doubt.

The stillness was like a brittle shell over the room. Men who'd known Young Brady and his late father looked thoughtful. Hanford watched Trace's gun lower and moved out from the bar to shout some more. But Clem Smith banged the counter with a bung-starter.

"What're you driving at, Cudlip?"

The shadow of a smile flicked Trace's features. "Find the stolen dinero—and we got the killer. Maybe we ought to go over and look in Hanford's room at the boarding house. Under the floorboards, specially."

Hanford only grinned and shrugged. He threw a key on the bar.

"You won't even have to bust down the door, boys. Sure. Send a committee over and see for yourselves."

Trace eased his gun barrel inside the waistband of his pants and shrugged.

"Well then, maybe we ought to take a good look-see in that cabin on the creek where Hagen's been living," he said. "Maybe if we dug into that dirt floor and hid it."

"Wait, now—" Hanford began.

Harsh now, Trace's voice slashed through. "No harm in looking in that dirt floor, is there? An innocent man wouldn't kick."

SOON Hanford started to bellow again. A table crashed against the wall as fat red-headed Hagen tried to sidle into the back room. Somebody grabbed at his arm and he went for his six-shooter. Then burly Hanford was digging for his weapon too, an instant after he slung a whiskey bottle at Trace. Gunfire ripped the barroom.

One moment Trace was just standing there. The next he was in the deadly gunman's crouch with the big Colt spitting from his steady hand. He winged Hagen as the fat man triggered wildly. Hagen vanished behind an overturned table. Hanford's weapon fanned fire-flame toward Youny Brady in the front doorway. Everybody seemed to be screaming and cursing through the gun thunder. A bald-headed man, hit by a stray slug, winged a chair at one of the lamps and stampeded for the main door, charging into Brady.

Trace hurled himself sideward to get clear of the angle of the bar to fire at Hanford. But a tide of men, fighting to get outside to safety, slammed him back around the corner, spilling him off balance. Shots extinguished the second lamp. Trace battled his way out to the middle of the floor, dropped to his knees as a bullet from Hagen, entrenched behind a table top, howled past his ear. He saw Clem Smith's bleeding head rear into sight behind the bar. Then Smith went down again, struck from behind as the shotgun clattered from his grip. Trace knew where Hanford was then.

"Take Hagen!" the deadly calm Trace bawled at Brady. Trace himself went flat on the floor and pumped a couple of slugs through the top of the overturned table. A scream from there pierced the slam of guns.

Flaming oil from a fallen lamp licked up on the floor and dyed the interior in a fitful treacherous unholy light. And a six-shooter began to spatter from outside in the road. The tow-headed gambler fighting alongside Brady went down with a smashed leg. And then Brady staggered sideward, caught by a bullet from the outside gunman. Yelling to him to stay down, Trace scrambled to the side door and out.

He ran around the corner and saw Burdee outside the front and firing in. Trace's smoking gun bucked in his hand twice. He saw Burdee jump into the air, eyeballs bulging under the moon as if he had been struck an invisible blow. Trace tried to fire again but the hammer pinged on an empty shell.

Leaping back behind the corner of the building, he reloaded hastily. When he peered out again, Burdee was on his back in the moon-laved alkali, awaiting a ride to Boothill. Then he spotted several hurrying figures moving down close to the building fronts. One was Hagen, hunched with the agony of a drilled shoulder. The other was Hanford. A third man, Brady, who had recovered from the bullet which had creased his scalp, was dodging toward a horse-trough.

"Throw in your cards, gents!" Trace called as he jumped out and glided after them.

The wounded Hagen at once dropped behind the nearby horse-trough. But Hanford twisted and sent a bullet whistling at Trace. Trace took after him, zigzagging himself, closing in inexorably. He passed the front door as another bullet from Hanford jetted the dust close to Trace's boots. Trace kept going.

In the meantime two horsemen had dashed around the corner from the side street, reining up their sliding ponies to observe what was going on. One was a deputy sheriff from Elson City. At his side was a U. S. marshal.

"Careful, feller! Wait! That's that killer, Stub Dowsey, by grab!"

But the implacable Ben Trace was waiting for nobody and nothing. He ducked behind a barrel as Hanford pulled a second gun and fired again. Then Hanford ran up on the dark porch of a little house and dropped in back of the solid plank railing. Trace left cover and darted in toward him. Muzzle flame spurted and licked over the top of the railing. Again and again. And one lucky slug smashed the ejecting lever off Trace's gun, driving the weapon from his hand. Han-

ford, so burly he looked almost short, jumped up into plain view to finish the job.

Tall Trace kept charging right in. The .32 from his shoulder rig appeared in his left hand. Livid powder flame ran out from it like a flickering yellow-orange ribbon. Hanford, Stub Dowsey, was slapped back against the front wall of the house. His face twisted in a scream that never came as he reeled forward. More gouging, searing chunks of lead hit his chest and pinned him against the wall. Then he slid from view, shirt spurting red, a ticket to Boothill as good as in his hand.

Men started to swirl out around the horse-trough where fat Hagen had gone down. But he shoved up quavering hands.

"I—I—surrender!"

"Like blazes you do!" the ruthless Trace yelled, swinging toward him. "It's easier to convict a dead man, you sneak!"

"Don't sh-shoot! I—I'll tell everything. Hanford killed Delcarte. We—we was all in on it." He started to babble a complete confession. . . .

IT WAS done. A man came back into the barroom, shaking his head. Apparently Ben Trace had already slipped out of town during the confusion following the gun battle. Brady started to push himself up. "I got to thank him, the lanky devil, even if he is Cudlip."

But Peter Thurston, the U. S. marshal who had come in with the Elson City deputy, shook his head.

"He isn't Cudlip the outlaw." The marshal took the drink Clem Smith, head encased in bandaging, passed him. The marshal reviewed the case. It had been a clever trick of Stub Dowsey, using the handle of Hanford, to stick right in the country where the latest manhunt for him had started. Explaining his bandaged wrist as the result of a slug from Dowsey's gun had shunted all suspicion away from him.

"Burdee and that Hagen are a couple of his bunch, of course. They sized up the feud between you, Brady, and Delcarte, and saw in it a chance for an easy clean-up, throwing the guilt neatly on you. If B. T. Lang hadn't bought chips in the game, why I don't know what we'd have done."

"Who did you say, Marshal?"

"B. T. Lang, gentlemen. The famous marshal who got Wild Dan Cudlip in Brownsville that night. That's who Ben Trace is. Don't you savvy? Benjamin Trace Lang is his full name. He hung up his badge and his guns the night he got Cudlip."

"Holy suffering snakes!" Brady breathed. The whole room gasped. Then Clem Smith asked why he'd quit and changed his name.

Thurston looked sad. "Because Lang always had a conscience. A plumb devil of a one! Dan Cudlip had come in and given himself up on that last shooting charge—of which he was innocent, by the way—that night in Brownsville. One of his boys was hurt bad and Cudlip brought him in to a doctor, surrendering himself to avoid a gun ruckus with his wounded friend involved. Lang, B. T. Lang, didn't know that when he sloped in. Didn't realize that Cudlip was unarmed and was crossing from the jail to the house where his friend lay. Lang threw down on him and cut loose. Dropped him. When he learned the facts, he quit for good. His nerve was shot at the idea of almost murdering an unarmed surrendered man. He said he'd never be any good with a gun again."

Somebody said, "But the story was he didn't kill Cudlip."

"That's correct," said Thurston. "He didn't. A bullet in Cudlip's head left him senseless but alive, an idiot for life. That's why Lang has him out at his rancho, taking care of him for the rest of his days."

It was silent for some time.

Finally Clem Smith put a fresh bottle on the table.

"Drink hearty, gents. Trace—Mr. Lang—he sure proved how good he was with a gun tonight!"

**Next Issue: THE PONY EXPRESS PAYS OFF, by Reeve Walker**


# Kidneys Must Remove Excess Acids

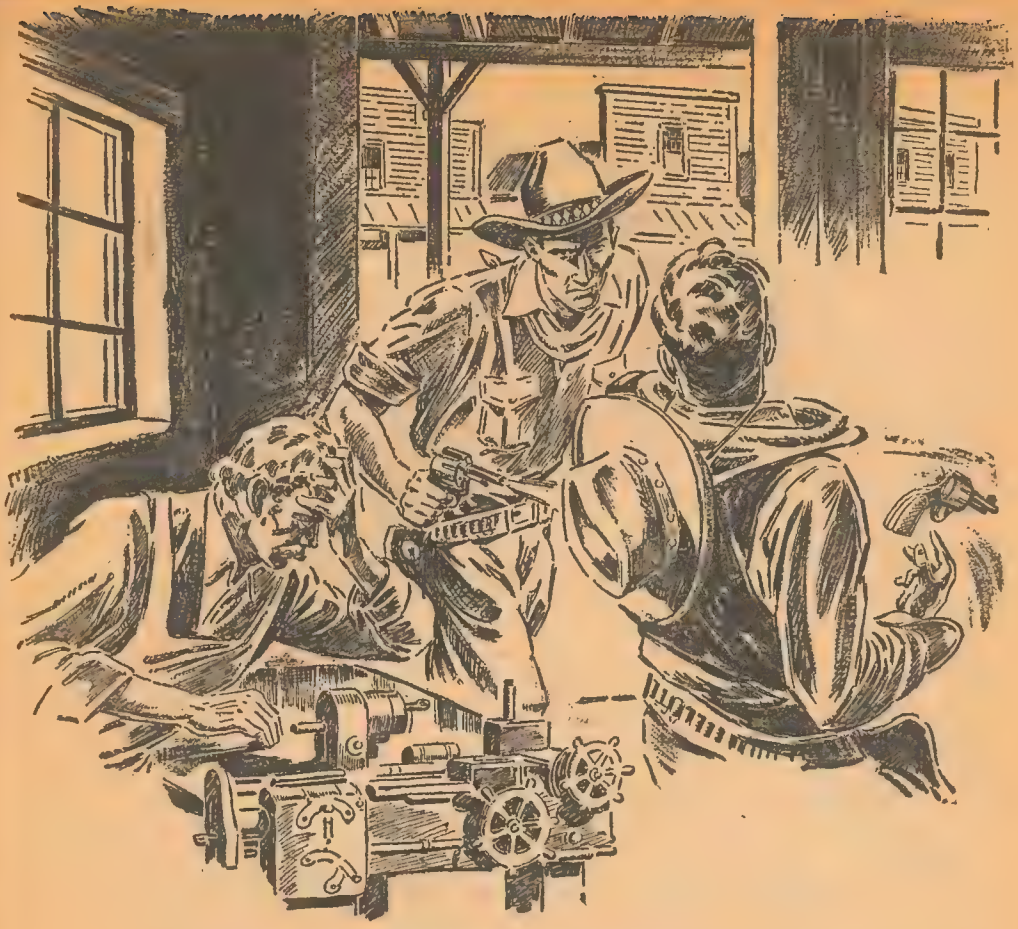
## Help 15 Miles of Kidney Tubes Flush Out Poisonous Waste

If you have an excess of acids in your blood, your 15 miles of kidney tubes may be overworked. These tiny filters and tubes are working day and night to help Nature rid your system of excess acids and poisonous waste.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Kidneys may need help the same as bowels, so ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills.

(Adv.)



After that fourth shot, Blackwell's gun flew out of his lax fingers

# GUNNED FROM THE GRAVE

## By RALPH J. SMITH

*A Hand of Vengeance Reaches Out for a Killer!*

THE legal-looking envelope that had just come in on the Chamita stage gave off an ominous sound as young Ted Garrison tore it open.

Standing there in his father's gun shop, he unfolded the letter and read it. For long moments he regarded it, so long that old Mat Garrison, seated at the tool-littered bench, lifted questioning eyebrows,

Blindly Ted passed the letter over to his father. Then he turned abruptly and walked out the door. A silent breed, the Garrisons, and when they couldn't conceal their emotions, they ducked.

Old Mat, famed from the Brazos to the Milk River for his wizardry as a gunsmith, held the letter to accommodate eyes weary from close work at the bench.

The measured ticking of the clock grew loud in the little shop as he read. Andy, his other son, up Chamita way. Something had happened to Andy! Andy had been killed!

Gropingly, old Mat turned to his bench, seeking as he always had in time of crisis, the solace that painstaking craftsmanship brought.

He reached for a tool. It was not there. He felt in his pockets, then pulled out several drawers. Still he didn't find it. He rose to his feet and began going through cubby-

holes in the wall behind him. His exploring hands pulled out an old cartridge belt, its loops filled with shells. Old Mat paused.

Funny, he thought, how things this morning keep centering on Andy. A weary ghost of a smile twisted his lips as he looked at the belt. Andy couldn't shoot shucks beside Ted. Never could, and he'd had to take a lot of good-natured chaffing from Ted because of it. That is, until one day Andy had fixed up that box of shells. That had silenced Ted.

The door of the shop opened and the attached bell gave its warning tinkle. Old Mat turned to the patron.

The stranger held out a Colt, a .41 calibre model. Mat laid the belt on the counter and took the gun.

"She's new and stiff," the man said. "Needs honin' down. The boys up to Chamita said yuh're the man to do it." He unbuckled his cartridge-belt and slung it on the bench. "The buckle's bent. See if yuh can straighten it too."

Chamita. Old Mat took the gun. It had a single notch cut in the butt. A recent notch, judging by the raw look of the cut-out wood against the dark polish of the walnut surface.

The stranger interpreted old Mat's glance.

"Some kid up Chamita way," he grinned. "No whiskers and no gun savvy. Like shootin' fish in a barrel."

A KNIFE turned inside old Mat. Strange that Mordeciah Blackwell, Andy's killer, should be in his shop. Still, it wasn't strange either. The same stage that had brought the letter probably had carried Blackwell. These gunnies didn't stay anchored long. They rammed around most of the time.

Slain men usually have friends. But Blackwell, old Mat thought, obviously didn't know his relationship to Andy.

Worriedly the gunsmith's thoughts turned to Ted. If Ted learned this stranger in town was the killer of his brother—

Slowly the old man began disassembling the gun, thinking. Some of the ache went out of him as he became immersed in the task. Guns were precision instruments, beautiful in their mechanical perfection. Only man abused them, made them instruments of treachery.

Old Mat worked with a file and then with a hone and pumice stone and oil. He smoothed off the spring, honed down the trigger dogs, worked over the pull until it operated at a hair's touch. The hammer slid like quicksilver under his thumb. Slaughterer of his son this man might be, but old Mat's love of guns, his uncompromising craftsmanship, wouldn't let him deviate from his standards.

That aiming for perfection wouldn't even let old Mat hurry, though he craved to get this job finished and Blackwell out of the shop and out of town. A stranger couldn't come to a place the size of Painted Robe without someone recognizing him and word getting around. Ted would hear of it. And Ted, old Mat knew, would no more be a match for this gun sharp than Andy had been.

Old Mat screwed on the butt plate—the notched one—finishing the job. He raised his head to hand the pistol back.

Blackwell was holding the letter—the one from Chamita—in his hand. He had picked it up from the counter where old Mat had laid it. He was looking at Mat queerly.

"So yuh're the kid's dad?" he asked. "The small-town kid with the big ideas? Funny."

Old Mat thought of Andy, cut down as he stood with his good-natured appetite for life on manhood's threshold. That knife within him turned again. "Funny?" he echoed.

Blackwell's eyes narrowed at the tone. He snatched the gun from Mat's hand.

"Don't be getting ideas, pop." His voice turned ugly. "Did yuh monkey with this gun?"

"I'd not damage a gun for any man—or any reason," old Mat said with simple dignity.

Blackwell tried the gun's action. It worked like a jeweled watch.

Old Mat, out of the corner of his eye, saw Ted coming toward the shop. He was walking fast, his head forward. Old Mat suddenly prayed inwardly that he would not have to lose his other son to this murderer. Desperately he sought a way out.

Then Mat had it. His hand clenched over a heavy eighteen-inch rasp. He would get Blackwell to turn his head. Then he would lay him out with a blow of the rasp.

Blackwell balanced the gun approvingly in his hand. He was satisfied.

"Don't that beat all?" He grinned and repeated, "So yuh're the kid's dad?"

"Yeah," old Mat said. He nodded toward Ted coming up the plank sidewalk, and his muscles tensed in readiness. "And there comes his brother."

Blackwell turned his head, all right, as old Mat had figured he would. But the self-preservation instinct of a predatory killer saved him. Automatic reflex caused him to step back out of Mat's reach as he looked around.

Mat cursed himself inwardly with a tired, aged bitterness. Not only had he failed but he had tipped Blackwell off, thereby robbing Ted of any advantage of surprise. He had condemned his second son to death.

Ted was close now.

Blackwell's eyes were calculating slits.

"Looks like e's got a burr under his saddle, the way he's walkin'. Probably the stage driver told him who I am."

The gunman slid open the loading gate of

his hogleg. He reached over the counter.

"Give me that belt. Quick!"

Ashen-faced, old Mat automatically slid him the belt he had reached for. But not quickly enough. Blackwell's face went dead and ugly. He swung that Colt like a bludgeon. It caught old Mat alongside the head.

Things started going around and around and old Mat was able to keep erect only by a great effort. He could feel hot blood spurting out of the gun-opened cut and cascading down his face. He was conscious of the snick of cartridges going into the cylinder, the snap of the loading gate going shut.

THE bell tinkled then as Ted came through the door. Old Mat forced himself to remain conscious.

Blackwell stood with the gun concealed by his body. As the door opened, he raised his hand and fired, and the detonation rocked the tiny shop. Surprise and pain and a desperate urgency showed on Ted's face.

Blackwell's gun blasted again. It was point-blank range but somehow Ted still stood. He had collected himself now and his hand was diving for his holstered gun. Before he could draw, Blackwell's hogleg blasted again.

Ted's gun was out and level now. The two guns went off at once and the double detonation rattled the windows of the shop. Ted still stood after that fourth shot. Blackwell jerked, and his gun flew out of his lax fingers.

Blackwell's gun hand came down slowly. He took a step forward. His knees buckled. He started to crumple. He made a futile grab for the counter's edge, then slumped to the floor, the mark of gun lead square between his eyes.

Suddenly the room was full of townsfolk, with Sheriff Tim Monahan in the forefront. Ted was bending over old Mat who, dizzy from blood loss, had collapsed to the floor.

"Are yuh hurt bad, Dad?" he demanded.

Old Mat rose above pain and age. "I feel fine," he said. And he did.

"I was just comin' back—" Ted said.

He stopped, groping. A silent breed, the Garrisons. He couldn't explain that he had gained control of himself, had returned to be with his father.

"I was just comin' back for a pair of gloves I forgot," he finished. "Who's this hombre? How come he started blastin' me?"

"He's the man who killed Andy," old Mat explained. "He thought yuh was comin' shootin'. He thought yuh knew he was the one who killed Andy. His name's Blackwell. Mordeciah Blackwell."

Sheriff Monahan didn't get it. "But I've heard of this Blackwell. He's sudden death with a gun. What made him miss all them shots at that range? How come Ted could cut him down? Ted's no hand with a hogleg."

Old Mat rose to Ted's defense. "Ted's right handy with a gun," he said loyally. "He always was. Better'n Andy. He used to tease Andy about it. Andy got tired of it, too. One day Andy took a box of shells and pried all the leads out of the cartridges. Then he took some soap and shaved up some pencil leads and mixed it up and molded the stuff in a bullet mold. Then he stuck them back in the casin's. They looked just like the real thing. He loaded Ted's gun with 'em on the sly and challenged him to a shootin' match. Naturally, Ted didn't hit nothin'."

Monahan had a warm understanding of the way age makes a man's mind wander. But he had an Irishman's quick impatience, too.

"I know—I know," he cut in. "But about this shootin'."

"This is about the shootin'," old Mat said firmly. "The belt with the trick shells Andy passed off on Ted somehow got tucked away in a bin here. I ran across it today and laid it there on the counter, beside Blackwell's, when I was fixin' his gun. When he thought Ted was gunnin' for him I—well, I must have handed him the wrong belt. It was them shells he shot point-blank at Ted."

The sheriff held his face sober and credulous.

"A mistake, Mat," he said gravely. "Yes, sir, a lucky mistake." He turned to Ted. "I reckon, Ted, that since Blackwell shot four times at you first, yore killin' him was plain self-defense."

Old Mat resumed his search for the missing tool. That ache over Andy was there. It always would be.

But he felt better.

***"You Must Leave—Tonight—or Die!"***

THAT was the warning Tom Glenning received after he began probing the mystery at the Bar-Two Ranch—but Tom just grinned and continued the investigations that lead to amazing surprises in DUDE WRANGLER, a novel of today's West by William Polk that races with action thrills!

**COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE**

*An Exciting Complete Navajo Raine Novelet*

Utterly calm and silent in the face of death, Wayne Morgan saw Navajo Raine and the faithful Yaqui, Blue Hawk, closing in

Navajo Raine pulled his guns. "I'll do Morgan's talking for him," he said

# BOOTHILL BELLER BOX

## By JACKSON COLE

*When Wayne Morgan, Famous Robin Hood Outlaw, Faces Hangnoose Peril at the Hands of Human Polecats, a Lightning-Swift Arizona Ranger Joins the Fray to Help a Fellow Fighter for Justice!*

### CHAPTER I

*Murder Rides at Sundown*

LATE that afternoon, it began to snow. Wind from the high levels of the Francisco mountains carried the snow into the town of Flagstone, the icy flecks making a gritty sound against the office windows of the Pine Peak Lumbering Company. Gunmetal clouds had brought early darkness to the town, and the raw wintery wind had emptied the frozen street of all cowhands and townsfolk. It was a cold, unguarded hour that was made for murder.

Old Sam Kedrick was working over the company books in the Pine Peak office when the man came in. As the door opened it released a blustery draft of cold air that ruffled the papers on Kedrick's desk.

"Can't yuh shut that door faster?" the oldster complained. "No sense blowin' this room inside out."

Kedrick rearranged the papers on his desk, then creaked around in his swivel chair. He was a gaunt man whose vision had been dimmed by age beyond repair. Peering through his thick glasses, he could only vaguely see the bulky shape of the man pushing the door shut against the wind.

Flecks of snow were changing to small drops of water on the plank floor. Kedrick bent forward in his chair to shorten the distance and clear his hazy vision. But that didn't help much.

"Is that you, son?" he asked.

The man didn't answer. He turned slowly, and Kedrick thought he saw a gun in the man's gloved hand. But the oldster wasn't sure.

"Is that you, Jeff?" Kedrick asked again. Age had made him crochety. "Speak up, boy. Do yuh have to remind me how bad my eyes are?"

"It ain't Jeff," the man at the door said dryly.

Alarm and a sense of impending disaster began ringing a warning bell in old Sam Kedrick's brain. Trouble had long been haunting his company, and now he could feel an even more personal danger clamping down on him. He couldn't understand it.

He started to push out of his chair, but something in the voice of the man at the door halted him.

"Yuh ought to know who I am, Kedrick."

Then the man was moving away from the door and toward Kedrick's desk. He had a gun in his hand and, coming closer, he cut through the haze that blurred the oldster's vision. Now the craggy lines of the man were etched indelibly in Sam Kedrick's mind —a broad-carved face and wide-slashed mouth, a corded neck that hinted of the brute power in his big frame. And in his hand was a leveled gun that was ready to kill.

Even through his horror, old Sam Kedrick felt a stab of bitter surprise.

"So it's you!" he said. Hatred turned his voice hoarse. "So it's been you behind all this trouble!"

The man nodded, coldly mocking. "I reckon yuh know why I came, Kedrick."

"Yes," Kedrick said, then made a futile grab toward a gun in his desk drawer.

He didn't even live to touch the weapon. The killer's gun punched out three slamming shots, and each slug tore its way through the oldster's body.

The killer moved rapidly after that. He sheathed his gun, and caught up the right hand of the dead man. He pushed one lax finger into the blood reddening the shirt of the slumped figure, then stretched the dead arm to the top of the desk.

The killer used Kedrick's finger and Kedrick's blood to write a message, scrawling words of red across the pages of an open ledger that read:

"Wayne Morgan killed m—"

Then quickly the killer turned, and strode out into the gathering winter storm. . . .

IT WAS that same storm that had driven "Navajo Tom" Raine off his trail. For thirty miles that day, since he had left the camp of Kuchene, his friend and chief of a tribe of Navajos, Tom Raine had seen the blizzard taking shape in the high-thrown peaks of the Francisco mountains.

At first he had ridden with the hope that he might miss the full impact of the storm, driven by the urgent message that had reached him from Burt Mossman, Captain of the Arizona Territorial Rangers. But that hope had faded as the day grew older.

"We've got to push on through if we can, Wampum," Raine muttered to the giant blue roan he rode. "The way Cap'n Mossman wrote, seven kinds of trouble are about to bust loose down at Wagonwheel. He wouldn't have interrupted my visit with Kuchene if things didn't look bad."

It had been during the first few days of his visit with the old Navajo chieftain that the message from the Ranger captain had reached Raine. Those few days had only served to deepen his regret for having to leave Kuchene's camp.

Tall and lean, Tom Raine had many times been mistaken for one of the Indians he had just visited. His face was dark and flat-planed, his hair as long and black as that of a Navajo, reaching to his square, wide shoulders. Even the soft buckskin he wore, the silver and turquoise that embellished the butts of his low-slung guns, showed the influence of the friendly Navajos who had once rescued him when he had been threatened by death from hunger and exposure.

At that time he had been only twelve years old, orphaned when his father, old "Powder" Raine, had been murdered while trying to bring law and order into the bloody Tonto Basin. The boy had been forced to flee into the mountains, and there he had been rescued by a wandering tribe of Kuchene's Navajos. He had been accepted as one of them, taught all their lore and legends, and because of those Indians he had known only a feeling of deep pride those many times he had been mistaken for a Navajo.

Yesterday Tom Raine had been one of Kuchene's tribe, a Navajo in spirit and action. Today, with his annual visit broken short, he was again a lawman, grimly riding toward the job he had been given.

The trail led across the sage and grass of the high plateau, and around the east flank of the mountains. In mid-afternoon he felt the first cold touch of driven snow against his face, and range wisdom warned him to make camp before the full force of the blizzard struck. But he pushed stubbornly on.

The storm gained strength rapidly. The white cones of the Franciscos disappeared behind rolling banks of gun-metal clouds, then the dark pine belt of the mountains faded and vanished behind a swirling gray haze of snow.

One instant Navajo Raine could see the scrubby vegetation of the plateau printed against the back-drop of mountains. The next instant he was lost in a world of slash-

ing white. Wind came roaring down from the high peaks, and the temperature seemed to drop twenty degrees in as many seconds.

Cold bit through the soft buckskin of the Arizona Ranger's jumper, and he knew this was just his first taste of what was yet to come. It might take hours for the freak storm to blow itself out, and in his haste to hit the trail Navajo Raine had not packed to stand the hammering of a sub-zero gale for that long.

But he urged Wampum stubbornly on.

By the end of the first hour he was half-blinded. Icy particles of driven snow slashed the unprotected skin of his face like tiny jabbing needles, and thickening crusts of frozen snow formed in his eyebrows and the day-old beard stubble on his jaw.

He bent forward against the pounding of the wind, and found warmth in the neck of his blue roan. But there was danger in that seductive body heat of the horse. It filled him with an infinite desire to sleep, and sleep would bring inevitable death in this plunging temperature.

Navajo Raine fought his mind awake, slapping his arms to his body to restore blood circulation. It was hard to believe that the blizzard could have hit him so hard in such a short time. Abruptly he realized that his mount was no longer moving.

"Shake out of it, Wampum!" Raine yelled against the heavy roar of wind. But the roan refused to move.

RAINE swung stiffly out of saddle, stamping numbed feet on the frozen ground. Long experience on a hundred danger trails had bred in him a deep faith in the judgment of his giant roan. If Wampum refused to go on, then there was a good reason.

Raine's groping hands revealed what his half-blinded eyes could not see in the chaos of whirling snow. He turned back, pressing close to Wampum's head.

"Yuh knew the trail forked here even if I didn't!" Navajo Raine muttered. "One heads on south, and yuh think we ought to take the other fork into Flagstone town. Yuh got more sense than I've got, Wampum!"

So it was the blizzard that detoured Navajo Raine away from the job he had been given by Captain Burt Mossman.

He rode into Flagstone without knowing at first that he had reached the town. The diffused yellow light of a window drew the Ranger to the office of the livery stable. He pushed open the door, and felt the warmth from the room's iron stove hit him. A man, half-asleep in his chair, jerked around, startled by Navajo Raine's entrance.

"By Judas, man, yuh pick a devil of a time to be ridin'!"

Heat was beginning to hurt Raine's chill-cramped muscles.

"I've got a hoss outside," he said impatiently. "Look after him, will yuh? Give him the best."

"Shore—shore. But yuh'd better stay here until yuh thaw out. Injun, ain't yuh?"

Raine didn't answer that. He turned back to the door.

"What I want is a bed and a good night's sleep. Give my roan the best, and I'll pay yuh double when I call for him."

"The hotel is down the street," the livery man called out as Raine went out the door.

## CHAPTER II

### *Rawhide Ranger*

IN THE shelter of the buildings, the wind was not so bad. Navajo Raine groped his way down the plank walk, and he had not gone a dozen rods when he heard the three dull blasts of sound. It halted him.

"Sounded like shots," he muttered thickly.

He listened, but heard nothing more against the whine of wind through the buildings. Through the clouding snow, he could see the yellow haze ahead that marked the lighted window of another building. He moved on, pressed his face to the window, but couldn't see through the thick frost of the pane.

Maybe, he thought, what he had heard was tree limbs freezing and cracking.

He shoved on, and it was when he came to the corner of the building that the door suddenly was jerked open. He caught a vague glimpse of a heavy body outlined against the light, then the door was slammed shut, and the half-visible man was hurtling toward the Ranger.

"Hey, you!" Raine yelled.

He tried to brace himself, but chill had slowed his reflexes. The man's heavy body struck him, smashing him around and down. He hit the ground rolling, and shoved heavily to his feet as the man wheeled and started to run.

Those noises he had heard had been shots! Something was wrong — violence, murder! Navajo Raine suddenly knew that. His mind was working, and fast, but he couldn't get speed into his numbed body. He took a long stride toward the killer, but his muscles were sluggish, awkward. He tripped over his own feet, and fell, and it was the drop of his body against the back of the man's legs that plunged the killer to the ground.

Navajo Raine rolled over and came up, as

the man plunged savagely to his feet. The killer's hand stabbed under his coat, and Raine drove in close, trying futilely to put power into his chill-deadened muscles. He crowded against the killer he could only vaguely see, and heard the man's low, throaty oath.

The impact of a fist drove Navajo Raine back off balance, and through the haze in front of his snow-blinded eyes he saw the blur of the killer's gun sweeping up. Raine rocked desperately to one side, and that was when the gun blasted.

Something as light at first as the tap of a small finger touched the Ranger's temple. Then that lightness changed abruptly to a heavy blow that jarred into his brain, knocking the world itself out from under him. From somewhere, Raine thought he heard a man's shouting voice.

"That sounded like a shot!"

But that was the last Navajo Tom Raine knew—then . . .

A voice floated into Navajo Raine's brain, pulling together the broken threads of his consciousness. "The wind died down for a minute, or mebbe I wouldn't have heard it. It was a shot all right. The slug clipped the side of this feller's head, and cold as he was, it didn't take much to lay him out."

"An Injun, ain't he, Sheriff?" a deeper, heavier voice asked.

"I reckon. Looks like a Navajo, but there's somethin' about him . . . Wait a minute. He's beginnin' to come out of it."

Navajo Raine opened his eyes on a wall that held a single barred window. So it was the sheriff who had heard the killer's shot, and had brought him in off the street! He must have been carried into the office of the town's jail.

For a moment Raine lay without moving, remembering the icy hammering of the blizzard, his sluggish attempt to fight, the red flare of the killer's shot. There was a pulse of ache beating in his left temple, and the room's heat had melted the numbing chill from his body. He felt stronger than he would have expected.

He shifted his glance slowly, picking up the weathered faces of the several town citizens and range men who crowded the jail office. One man, tall and raw-boned, spoke out his blunt curiosity.

"I'm Jacob Kern. Who are you, and what happened?"

Raine looked at the man without answering. Silence, he had long ago learned was one of a lawman's best weapons, and he was wondering if the man who had tried to kill him was in this room. Certainly the killer could not have gone far in the blizzard raging outside.

But there was no hint of guilt or strain in Jacob Kern's rugged face. Nor in the features of any other man present.

Another man, younger than Kern, and with a lean body, spoke up easily.

"Yuh're goin' at him wrong, Jake. He can't understand yuh."

A lazy grin broadened Jake Kern's mouth. "It's the first time I knew Jeff Kedrick could speak Injun. Let's hear yuh ask him what this is all about, feller."

The man called Jeff Kedrick shook his head. "I don't speak Navajo. Anyhow, this is the Law's job."

Navajo Raine sat up on the cot to which he had been carried, and a short, square man who wore a sheriff's badge came toward him, frowning slightly.

"Me Sheriff Benbolt," the Sheriff said slowly. "Me white chief here, yuh savvy?"

The Arizona Ranger nodded. Amusement cut through the grim thoughts in his mind.

"Me find yuh on street. Yuh shot." The Sheriff made motions with his hands. "Bang-bang—hit-um head. Yuh savvy? Yuh tell-um white chief what happened."

"Shore," Navajo Raine drawled. "I was jumped out there by some gun-quick jasper, and danged near killed. That's what happened."

Amazement struck the lawman's square features, then a red flush of anger.

"Hey, you're no Injun!" he flared. "Why didn't yuh say so?"

"Yuh didn't ask me."

Navajo Raine had no time for more than a moment's idle amusement. He took his laughs where he found them, enjoyed their full flavor with the deep relish of a man for whom life had been more bitter and violent than humorous. So his smile at Sheriff Benbolt's discomfort faded almost as quickly as it had come.

"It's not the first time I've been taken for an Indian, Sheriff. I lived with 'em long enough to look like 'em. I'm Navajo Tom Raine."

His name had its effect on the men in the room. If he had hoped that identifying himself would startle a look of guilt into the face of one of the men, he was disappointed. He read surprise and curiosity, respect for his reputation as a lawman, but no sign of cringing guilt.

"So yuh're Burt Mossman's tophand Ranger!" Jacob Kern's grin was broad. "Yuh may be the toughest hellion on high heels, but I'll remember yuh for stringin' Sam Benbolt along." He mimicked the Sheriff: "'Me white chief here, yuh savvy'? Sam, yuh shore can talk Injun!"

"Lay off, Jake," the Sheriff growled. He kept his dark stare on the Arizona Ranger. "Yuh ain't explained yet who bounced that slug off yore noggin'," he reminded.

"If I knew I wouldn't let you square the score," Navajo Raine answered. He told what had happened in a grim, tight voice. "I figger the jasper who tried to drill me is the

same one who fired them other three shots."

Sheriff Sam Benbolt shifted a slow glance around the room, then pulled his stare back to the Territorial Ranger.

"We didn't hear any other shots," he said deliberately.

Impatience rankled Navajo Raine.

"Yuh didn't hear the shot that killed Lincoln," he said cuttingly, "but that's no sign he wasn't murdered!"

He shoved to his feet, and from habit brushed his hands across his flanks. He stabbed a glance at the Sheriff.

"Where are my guns?"

The lawman shifted uncomfortably. "Well, now—"

Raine strode past the Sheriff, and the temper that showed in his eyes cleared an aisle through the watching men. He came to Benbolt's desk, pulled open a drawer. His guns were inside. He reached for them.

"Now wait a minute!" Benbolt said uncertainly.

Raine pulled out the heavy weapons, deliberately staring at the Sheriff while he strapped them on.

"Bein' careful enough to take the guns off a stranger yuh find in the street is one thing, Sheriff," Navajo Raine said evenly. "Not believin' me is another. If yuh'd troubled to look in my pocket, yuh'd have found my credentials."

"Papers can be forged," Sam Benbolt said doubtfully.

"Then the devil with yuh!" Raine snapped. He had been pounded for three hours by a blizzard, he was tired and hungry, and the ache in his head made him unreasonable. "I heard three shots fired just before that jigger jumped me, and I aim to find out what happened. You can stay here and keep warm if yuh want."

HE REACHED for his buckskin jumper, and pulled it on. The other men grabbed their coats hurriedly, and followed him out into the storm.

They kicked through boot-high drifts of snow, and stumbled across the frozen ruts of the street.

Young Jeff Kedrick moved up to Raine's side to set their direction. Kedrick's yell was whipped away by the icy wind.

"The sheriff found yuh outside my dad's office—right up here. Dad was workin' late, and it's funny he didn't hear that shot." Kedrick broke off as though suddenly gripped by anxiety. "Which buildin' did yuh say that gunman come out of?"

Navajo Raine pointed. Jeff Kedrick suddenly cursed.

"That's dad's office!" he shouted hoarsely, and drove ahead at a run.

The old man was dead at the desk where he had been working, a gaunt figure pitifully slumped forward in his swivel chair. Horror was in Jeff Kedrick's eyes, his face paper-white, as he stared at his father whose life had been so suddenly and ruthlessly smashed into extinction.

"Three shots just like the stranger said," a townsman murmured harshly, "and every slug tore through old Kedrick's heart. He never knowed what hit him."

"He lived long enough to name his murderer!" Sheriff Benbolt grated.

Blood was on the old man's stiffening finger, and some of that blood from his body had traced scrawling words across the pages of the open company ledger.

Navajo Tom Raine bent forward and read them. Then he turned slowly, his green-flecked eyes cold and hard.

"Who is this gent, Waine Morgan?"

Young Jeff Kedrick gave the answer, his voice low and bitter and savage.

"He's the new cowhand Luke Crosser hired on the big Three C Ranch west of here. I reckon Morgan won't live to collect his first month's pay, cuss him!"

Jeff Kedrick swung savagely across the room, but three long strides, as smooth and quick as the movement of a cat, put Navajo Raine's back against the door.

"This is a job for the Law to handle, Jeff," the Arizona Ranger said softly.

The quiet impact of Raine's voice momentarily halted Jeff Kedrick. The other men in the room shifted toward the side walls, made wary by the Frontier adage that one act of violence always brought more.

"Pull yore horns in, Raine," Jacob Kern said in the taut silence. "Who's got a better right to settle this than young Jeff? It was his old man who was murdered."

Kern's rough voice took the momentary uncertainty out of Jeff Kedrick. The young man's mouth hardened, and bitterness narrowed his eyes.

"Get out of my way, Raine!"

The Arizona Ranger shook his head slowly.

"Yuh'd better think this over, Jeff. No one man's got the right to take the law into his own hands."

"Do I have to slug yuh away from that door?" Kedrick flared, his voice harsh.

Raine's smile was faintly cold. "I'm tryin' to talk sense into yuh, mister. But if yuh feel that way, I always wear my nose out in the open to oblige anybody who wants to take a poke at me. Yuh ain't goin' through this door till uh've listened to reason!"

**Next Issue: NAVAJO RAINE in NOT BY A DAM SITE**

## CHAPTER III

### *Timber for Trouble*

JEFF KEDRICK swung with a sudden and savage flare of temper. But Navajo Raine was no longer half-blinded by snow, his muscles no longer cramped by chill. He rolled away from that first blow, slipped inside the second. He kicked the heel of his hand hard against Kedrick's left shoulder, then caught and jerked in sharply on the man's left arm. It was a trick of balance and leverage that spun Kedrick's back to the Territorial Ranger, after which Navajo Raine put his boot against the seat of the man's pants and shoved hard.

The townsmen had been starting grimly across the room, but the stumbling plunge of Jeff Kedrick's body halted them. Navajo Raine pulled his gun deliberately, and put his back against the wall.

"Now we're all goin' to relax and talk things over," he said grimly.

Jeff Kedrick came up from the floor savagely. His lips were thin and bitter, and a blaze of temper was in the glance he threw at Sam Benbolt.

"Are yuh lettin' him get away with this, Sheriff?" Kedrick demanded harshly. "Pullin' that gun ought to be enough to show yuh what he really is."

The lawman's stare at Navajo Raine was as stony as his expression.

"Yuh'd better put up that shootin' iron, mister," he said slowly.

A faint edge of mockery was in the Arizona Ranger's brittle laugh.

"For the time bein', this gun will make up for yore lack of judgment, Sheriff," he answered coldly. "I've told yuh who I am, but yuh don't seem to want to believe me."

"After all the trouble I've had around here lately, I'd believe the President was a liar until he proved who he was," Benbolt grated. "And don't say anything about showin' yore credentials. I told yuh papers can be forged or stole, and—"

A man kicked the door open and entered, his face ruddy from the chill of the blizzard outside. He looked at Raine's gun with a start of surprise, then a slow grin split his lips.

"I reckon yuh can put away that persuader now, Ranger," the man said. "Benbolt saw them papers in yore pocket, and sent me out to wire yore headquarters. I just got Mossman's answer." The man looked at Sheriff Benbolt. "He's Navajo Raine all right. Sam, some day yuh're going to get a scab on yore nose for not believin' what yuh see."

Navajo Raine sheathed his gun. Now that his identity had been verified, the reputation he had built across the Territory had its effect on the townsmen. Anger drained out of Jeff Kedrick's eyes, leaving only the hurt and bitterness over the murder of his father.

"I reckon I ought to apologize," he began, but Navajo Raine broke this off with a movement of his hand.

"Forget it, Kedrick. I'd have done the same thing."

Raine crossed the room, and shoved a log into the iron stove. Outside, the storm whined around the eaves of the building, and snow swept against the windows. The Ranger's face was as expressionless as that of a Navajo when he turned back to the townsmen. But the relentless glint of the man-hunter was in his green-flecked eyes.

"I rode into this town to wait out the storm," he said slowly. "The man who knocked me out must have been the one who murdered Jeff Kedrick's father, but I was too near snow-blind to see who he was. So far I don't know why old Kedrick was killed, or anything about this trouble here."

Jeff Kedrick furnished the details.

"Jacob Kern here," he explained, "owns a ranch next to Luke Crosser's Three C about ten miles west of town. About a year ago Dad and I leased timber rights from Kern, and Crosser didn't like that."

"Crosser is an old-timer who won't admit things are changin'," Sheriff Benbolt put in grimly. "He still believes the world was made to grow cows in, and nothin' else."

The rest of it followed a pattern that was familiar to Navajo Tom Raine—an old rancher fighting to protect his range against outsiders. Crosser was a cowman to the core, and Raine could understand the man's stubborn desire to keep the range as it had always been.

The knowledge that this land would inevitably be changed by the tides of civilization rolling in from the east and west was somehow distasteful to the Ranger himself. For he had lived as a Navajo, and had the Indian's love for a land that knew no roads or fences or settlements.

But there was a fair streak in Tom Raine, a part of the old Navajo chief's wisdom and training, and he knew the changes would be for the good of the Territory. Arizona needed schools and bridges and railroads, and for that it needed lumber and men like Jeff Kedrick and his father.

"WE STARTED cuttin' timber on the land Dad and I leased from Jake Kern," young Kedrick went on. "We didn't have much dinero, and Luke Crosser tried every trick he knew to drive us bankrupt. He blocked a road across his land, and we

had to build another. Then he started wreckin' our wagons, and makin' night raids on our camps."

Navajo Raine's green-flecked eyes were cold and hard.

"Yuh've got proof of this?"

Jeff Kedrick jerked his head. "They hit us without warnin', and they was always masked."

"Did yuh ever hit back?"

Kedrick's laugh was harsh. "We're lumbermen, not gun-fighters, and we wanted to keep peace. But my men are from Minnesota and Michigan, and they're not afraid of a fight. They've been wantin' a crack at Luke Crosser, and when they hear what's happened to Dad nothin' I can say will stop 'em."

Navajo Raine listened to that in silence. He had a burning memory of the violence and injustice of a range feud that had brought death to his lawman father. He wondered grimly if anything he could do could prevent such a war from flaming on this range.

"If our telephone was finished, I'd call camp now and tell the men what happened," Jeff Kedrick broke out.

Navajo Raine's eyes widened slightly. "Telephone?"

"The one we're tryin' to run through from town to camp," Kedrick answered. "It's another thing Crosser has been fightin'. He claims telephone wire will draw lightning and start range fires durin' the dry season. But in spite of his pole-choppin' and wire cuttin', we're within half a mile of camp with it."

Navajo Raine turned his brooding glance toward the frost-printed windows. He could feel restlessness beginning to take hold of the men behind him. They were honest men who wanted only to live in peace as free men, but they would be hard to handle unless old Kedrick's murderer met with swift justice. They lived by a code of tolerance for their honest neighbors, and swift punishment for law-breakers.

"Well, what yuh aim to do, Raine?" Jeff Kedrick demanded.

The Territorial Ranger turned slowly away from the window.

"That storm may not let up till mornin', and I couldn't find my way through to Crosser's ranch."

"All yuh'd have to do is follow the telephone line to Chimney Rock, then turn south into Shadow Valley," Kedrick said impatiently. "Yuh couldn't miss it."

The Ranger shifted his glance to Sheriff Benbolt.

"What do you figger on doin'?"

The Sheriff's mouth was a hard trap that let out each grim word. "Morgan don't know old Kedrick named him as his killer, so there's no rush bringin' him in. Jeff, you and Raine find yoreselves a hotel room. We'll wait till the storm blows out, before we go after him."

Once settled in his hotel room, Navajo Raine waited an hour before leaving it. He went past the room young Jeff Kedrick had taken, and turned down the rear stairway, careful to let no one see him. The stormy darkness that had ended the afternoon so early made the hour seem much later than the eight o'clock Raine's watch showed.

Outside, the icy gale struck him with undiminished force. Raine groped his way along an alley until he came to the livery stables at the edge of town, and the livery manager grumbled as he got out of his chair.

"Seems like a man can't get no rest around here even durin' a storm! I reckon yuh want yore hoss, too."

Navajo Raine nodded, and let no curiosity show in his green-flecked eyes.

"Yuh mean somebody else picked up his hoss?" he asked mildly.

"Yeah—Jeff Kedrick!" the livery owner said disagreeably. "Yuh'd think he wanted me to catch my death of cold, the way he rustled me outside! At least you promised to pay double for freezin' me," he reminded pointedly.

Impatience rode with Navajo Raine as he swung his giant roan out of town. The knowledge that young Kedrick had slipped away from his hotel room and ridden to his lumber camp promised nothing but trouble. He wondered how long it would take for Kedrick to gather his men and raid Luke Crosser's ranch.

THE wide circle Navajo Raine cut picked up the line of telephone poles west of town. He followed them, with the storm shoving hard against his back, plowing through drifts of snow and unseen tangles of brush. Two hours had passed before he made out the snow-blurred spire that would be Chimney Rock. Here he swung south, into the widening gap of Shadow Valley.

He came up to the Three C guardedly, and left Wampum in the cramped shelter of a saddle shed. Then he closed in on the ranchhouse, swinging his arms to restore circulation to chilled muscles. The wind was beginning to die out, and he knew another hour would bring an end to the storm.

With the tip of a finger he rubbed the frost away from a window, and through that cleared space he could peer into the house. Several weathered punchers were seated around the room, grimly watching the oldster who paced the floor in restless, choppy strides. This would be Luke Crosser, the Arizona Ranger knew, a stocky man with headstrong pride in every line of his rugged face. Through the window, Navajo Raine could catch snatches of the rancher's words.

"It's time we settle them saw-shovers once

and for all! If we let Kedrick's outfit get any stronger, we're ruined. I can't see where that new hand I hired has done any good. Where is Morgan, anyhow?"

A puncher made a gesture with his hand. "Still in the bunkhouse, I reckon."

Navajo Raine turned away from the window. He glanced around the ground surrounding the sprawling ranchhouse, searching for hidden danger. The wind was gone now, as swiftly and freakishly as the blizzard had struck, and already the temperature was beginning to rise. Snow was wet under foot, and by morning much of it would be gone.

Navajo Raine located the bunkhouse by the yellow rectangles of light showing through the darkness. He lifted the latch with his left hand, and jarred the door open with the point of his shoulder. A single swift stride took him inside, and his right hand was poised just over the butt of his gun.

The man inside twisted around in his chair, startled by Raine's sudden entrance.

"Do yuh always come into a house like somethin' is bitin' yore britches?" the man drawled.

A grin started on his wide lips, but was instantly wiped off. He stared at Raine's face intently, and frowned slightly as he read the threat of trouble there. He stood up slowly, tall and powerfully built, and with a catlike alertness hinted in the flow and ripple of his muscles. The man would be, Navajo Raine knew, a tough nut to crack when the showdown came.

"Are you Morgan?" the Ranger demanded.

The man nodded. Navajo Raine made no attempt to stall the issue. Here was a job to do, and he went into it with characteristic directness.

"I wouldn't make any trouble if I were you," he said bleakly. "Morgan, yuh're under arrest!"

Morgan's move was as unexpected as it was violent. He made no attempt to grab his guns, but the kick of one leg sent his chair crashing toward Raine. He followed the chair across the room, two leaping strides bringing him close to the Arizona Ranger.

Morgan's left smashed out, and even though Navajo Raine leaped to one side, riding the punch, there was pain in that blow. Again Morgan closed in on the Territorial Ranger, his right clubbing into Raine's middle. Raine drifted back, fighting for balance. He felt his shoulders touch the bunkhouse wall, and used that for leverage to throw himself forward.

The two men smashed together, hurling short battering blows at bodies and faces. It was a brutal moment with muscle matched against muscle, with each man trading blow for blow, and each stubbornly refusing to give ground.

Navajo Tom Raine would never have believed so much could be battered out of him in so short space of time. One minute he had been fresh and strong, and the next his body was a shell that contained nothing but throbbing pain. He couldn't seem to get enough air into his lungs, and a red haze was swimming in his vision.

But he knew he had hurt the other man just as much. Morgan was loose on his legs, and the blows he threw no longer carried their jolting power. He was licked, and he knew it, but he wouldn't quit. Nor would the Arizona Ranger. They stood toe to toe until their last strength was gone, and when Morgan finally fell, Navajo Tom Raine also went down.

They lay where they fell, drawing air into their pumping lungs. Morgan made no attempt to reach his guns, staring at the Arizona Ranger with faintly bitter dark eyes. Then a slow smile stretched his mouth.

"Danged if I'd want to trade knuckles with you every day! I must look like I tangled with a grizzly. It's how I feel. Who in blazes are you?"

"Navajo Raine."

"Burt Mossman's tophand Ranger! I've heard plenty about you!" The surprise that flickered in Morgan's dark stare changed to something almost sardonic. "I've had a lot of tin-horn lawmen try to take me in, but I never thought any Ranger would do it."

## CHAPTER IV

### *Bullets Before Breakfast*

RELUCTANT admiration stirred through Navajo Tom Raine. He could read no fear or remorse in Morgan's eyes. The man had made his fight according to the code of all honest men, clean and hard, and asking no quarter. It was odd that the killer of old Sam Kedrick had made no attempt to pull his guns.

"You don't look or act like a murderer," the Arizona Ranger said finally.

Morgan's laugh was grating. "One thing I've never been called is a murderer."

"Yuh didn't worry much about that record when you killed Sam Kedrick today," Raine said sternly.

"So that's why yuh come after me!"

Morgan pushed slowly up from the floor. He found himself a chair, sat down, watching the Arizona Ranger intently. He seemed, Raine thought suddenly, more like a man trying to solve a problem than a killer desperately hunting for a way to escape. It added to the strange sense of uncertainty haunting the Ranger's mind.

"It happens," Morgan said levelly, "I wasn't off the ranch today. Up to a few minutes ago, I was ridin' line fence to see that the cattle didn't drift and break through, but I was alone and I reckon yuh won't take my word for that."

"No, I reckon not," Navajo Raine said grimly, then confronted Morgan with the evidence against him.

Morgan smiled tightly. "If my name is written in old Kedrick's blood across his ledger, that's enough for any jury to hang me."

Not for an instant did Navajo Raine relax his alertness. There was a fair streak in the Ranger that made him only too willing to give Morgan a chance to state his case. But if the man was only playing for time, a chance to grab his guns, the Ranger would be ready for him.

Morgan was silent a long moment, thinking hard.

"I was framed for Kedrick's murder," he said then, as though arguing out a point with himself, "but I can't prove it." A strange intentness came into his dark eyes. "Raine," he said abruptly, "I'm goin' to tell you somethin' that only one other man alive knows. I'm an outlaw, but in my way I do just as much to keep law in this territory as you do. I've got another name, and I'm trustin' yuh never to mention it to anybody. I'm the Masked Rider!"

Surprise jolted Navajo Tom Raine. Uncounted times he had heard of the Masked Rider, an outlaw in the strictest sense of the word, but a man who had become a Robin Hood of the West to the weak and needy. The Masked Rider had become an almost legendary figure on the Frontier, a black-garbed man who rode a magnificent black stallion, and whose only aide was a faithful Yaqui Indian, Blue Hawk.

"I got wind of trouble here about a month ago," the Masked Rider said in his deep, calm voice. "I wrote Sam Kedrick for a job, usin' my name of Morgan, and he offered to put me on his payroll."

He took a letter from his pocket, handed it to Navajo Raine. Raine opened it, read the few terse words written in Sam Kedrick's scrawling hand.

Wayne Morgan:
You are hired. Report for work as soon as possible.

Sam Kedrick.

Something that was almost like an electric current, swift and penetrating, caught up the Arizona Ranger's thoughts. He looked sharply at the Masked Rider.

"Is there anything wrong with yore name in this letter—I mean the way old Kedrick wrote it?"

Wayne Morgan frowned slightly. He said, "No," then he asked curiously, "What yuh drivin' at?"

The Arizona Ranger didn't answer that, his thoughts already turning down a new and more deadly channel. Maybe there was a different and altogether unexpected answer to the trouble that gripped this range.

"I decided at the last minute against hirin' on with Kedrick's lumbermen," Wayne Morgan, the Masked Rider went on. "So I hit Luke Crosser for a job, figgerin' I'd learn more here."

"Find out anything?"

Morgan shook his head. "Nothin' I could prove. Crosser has made several night rides with his men, but he kept me busy somewhere's else so I couldn't follow. Mebbe he was out raidin' the Kedrick lumber camp."

"Where's yore Indian friend?" Navajo Raine asked, remembering the Masked Rider's Yaqui aide.

"Blue Hawk is in the hills above the Kedrick camp. I sent him to trail down the raiders who hit Kedrick's place a couple days ago, but he hasn't reported yet."

IT WAS then that the night suddenly shook to the roar of shots. They came without warning, close in to the bunkhouse, as horsemen swept into the ranch-yard. Through the rolling beat of gunfire, came young Jeff Kedrick's yell:

"All we want is Morgan! Find that killer, but don't plug him unless yuh have to. I want him to hang for what he done today!"

Wayne Morgan had moved swiftly at the first crash of shots, clamping his big hand over the stack of the oil lamp and smothering the flame.

"Light went out in the bunkhouse!" a raider sang out a warning. "Somebody's in there, Boss!"

"Watch the house!" came Kedrick's yell again. "Don't let them punchers out till they turn that killer over to us!"

The door of the bunkhouse was kicked open, framing a man's crouching figure against the outer darkness.

"Come out, whoever yuh are, or I'm comin' in!"

Navajo Raine made no sound as he crossed the darkened room to the wall. He began moving cautiously toward the door. Behind him, Wayne Morgan said, bitterly cool:

"A lot of honest men will get killed out there unless I give myself up."

"That you, Morgan?" the lumberman in the doorway called out sharply.

"Yes."

"Hey, Kedrick! He's here—in the bunkhouse!"

Navajo Raine was a silent shadow leaping into the doorway. The lumberman sensed, more than saw, his swift movement. The man tried to swivel his rifle, but he never had a chance. Navajo Raine's fist caught

him on the jaw, and he went down heavily.

But the timber man's warning had already reached the raiders. They were milling away from the ranchhouse now, firing only to hold Luke Crosser and his punchers inside.

"Morgan, get out of here!" Navajo Raine called sharply over his shoulder.

The Masked Rider's voice came from close behind the Arizona Ranger, calmly stubborn.

"I'm givin' myself up, Raine."

"Yuh danged fool! You didn't do that murder, but yuh can't prove it. They'll lynch yuh!"

Wayne Morgan's tone was inflexible. "If I slipped out now, Kedrick's men would stay here to hunt me. Crosser and his men would attack, and a lot of good men would be killed because of me. I'm lettin' 'em take me."

"Blast it, man," Navajo Raine burst out, "all I need is time and I think I can prove you didn't do it!"

"Get out of my way, Navajo!"

The Arizona Ranger tried to stop Morgan with a blow, but the darkness was thick and he could only vaguely make out Morgan's moving shape. He felt his knuckles scrape across the man's cheek, then heard the man's soft voice.

"I don't like to do this, Raine."

Then a blow came out of the darkness and struck the point of Navajo Raine's jaw, suddenly filling his brain with a roaring swirl of lights. He knew he was falling, but he couldn't stop himself. Then the lights changed to utter blackness, and the Arizona Ranger passed out cold. . . .

The darkness that clouded Navajo Raine's brain faded slowly, changing at first to a dim gray, and then to the yellow of lamplight flooding the bare walls of the bunkhouse.

The hands that shook him were rough and insistent, as was the voice in his ear.

"You come awake now, quick, savvy? You tell where Wayne Morgan go!"

Raine sat up, rubbing the point of his jaw where the blow had struck. Now that the haze was leaving his brain, he remembered the raid by Jeff Kedrick and his men. So Wayne Morgan was gone! Then Kedrick had taken Morgan somewhere else for the lynching. That knowledge sent a sudden grim urgency for action through the Arizona Ranger.

He looked at the man who had brought him back to consciousness, and saw a Yaqui Indian with a crimson bandeau circling his forehead, holding back long raven hair from his sharp-cut face. The Yaqui's eyes were black and almost savage in their intentness.

"I am Blue Hawk, friend of Wayne Morgan," the Yaqui said. "Find you here on floor, and make you come awake. You are the only man I found on the ranch."

Navajo Raine's stare narrowed grimly. "Yuh mean Luke Crosser and his cowhands are gone?"

"Si, senor." The Yaqui made an impatient movement with one brown hand. "Now you tell what happened to Wayne Morgan, savvy."

NAVAJO RAINE shook his head forlornly.

"I don't know what happened," he said, and a deep fear was sinking into his mind. "But I've got a hunch I don't like to think about, Blue Hawk."

He identified himself to the Yaqui, told about what he was sure was a murder frame and his fight with Wayne Morgan, then about the night raid by Jeff Kedrick's lumbermen.

"After the Masked Rider knocked me out," he said, "I don't know what happened. But he was giving himself up to keep a lot of honest men from gettin' killed. Chances are Kedrick took Morgan back to his lumber camp for the lynchin', and I reckon Crosser got his punchers together and followed."

"Then we better ride quick, senor," Blue Hawk said grimly.

Early dawn was beginning to drive a wedge of gray light into the horizon when Navajo Raine and the Yaqui left the Three C ranchhouse. They rode hard, and because Raine was unfamiliar with the country, he let Blue Hawk set their direction.

They pointed their mounts through the narrow mouth of the valley and onto a broad meadow where the snow, already beginning to melt, made riding treacherous with slush and mud. The unfinished telephone line quartered the first bulge of a mountain beyond the meadow, slanting toward a dark belt of pines above and to the west.

"Lumber camp, that way," Blue Hawk called out. "If we go there as the bird flies, we will be seen. We ride this way, senor."

The Masked Rider and Blue Hawk are at their fighting best in OKLAHOMA GUN SONG, a complete action novel by Oscar J. Friend, featuring Wayne Morgan in the Fall issue of MASKED RIDER WESTERN—10c at all stands!

## CHAPTER V

### *Pistols Buy Peace*

BLUE HAWK sent his mount across the meadow, and up the bulge of the mountain. The steepness of the pitch slowed their pace, but Navajo Raine knew there was wisdom in the Yaqui's move. They could do nothing for the Masked Rider if they were discovered by Kedrick's men and held off.

They climbed into the piñon, and here snow lay deep and loose beneath the trees. Blue Hawk bent their direction to the west, and now there was a growing light even in the pines.

There was something deadly in the silence of the dawn, and Navajo Raine thought with a deep and bitter sense of futility:

"Kedrick wouldn't wait this long to lynch Morgan!"

And if the Masked Rider died, it would be a loss from which the Frontier would not soon recover. The thought of that, the slender thread of hope that the Masked Rider might still be alive, drove the Arizona Ranger on.

They rode on, circling deadfalls and plunging through deep drifts of snow, and when Blue Hawk at last halted his winded mount, Navajo Raine drew rein. The Yaqui pointed down the slope through the trees.

"Lumber camp down there—not far."

Now that they were here, there was an uncertainty in the Yaqui, a fear of what might have already happened to Wayne Morgan, the Masked Rider.

"If we're too late," Navajo Raine said softly, "we've done the best we could, Blue Hawk."

He took in the details of the mountainside with a single quick glance, his mind already throwing together a desperate plan of action.

"I'll slip in on 'em from this side, Hawk, and you come in from the other. If we're split, we've got a double chance of surprisin' 'em. Let me make the first move, and you back me."

The Yaqui nodded, and faded off through the trees with a rifle in one hand. Navajo Raine swung down the slope hurriedly, his lips thin and hard. A changing breeze brought him the pungent odor of wood burning in a camp stove. Then he could hear the low, rough murmur of men's voices.

Then came a man's harsh shout:

"Boss, we've waited long enough! Let's get this lynchin' over with!"

Navajo Raine broke into a run, skidding and sliding down the slope. The knowledge that Kedrick had put off the hanging filled the Arizona Ranger with relief and a new determination that made him all the more dangerous.

No man in the lumber camp saw him as he came out of the trees, for their eyes were on the man they hated as a murderer. Wayne Morgan stood on a high shipping crate beneath the outstretched limb of a huge pine. The hang-noose was already tight around his neck, and all they would have to do was kick the crate out from under him.

In his first swift glance, Navajo Raine saw every detail of the impending tragedy. Luke Crosser and his punchers were tied and powerless on the ground, guarded by several hard-faced men behind Jacob Kern. That was in itself a story for the Arizona Ranger. Crosser and his punchers had tried to rescue Wayne Morgan, only to be trapped by Jacob Kern and his men.

Young Jeff Kedrick paced beneath the hang-tree, white-faced and nervous. The harsh murmuring of the lumbermen was silenced as Kedrick turned to the man who was about to die.

"Morgan, I wouldn't let these men hang yuh when we first got yuh because I wanted yuh to get a fair shake. It's more'n you gave my dad. I wanted the men to cool off a while before they decided whether to go ahead with this lynchin'. They've had eight hours to think it over, and they still want it. Have yuh got anything to say before I kick that box out from under yuh?"

Wayne Morgan shook his head. He was utterly calm in the face of death, unafraid. He saw Navajo Raine closing in, and he saw his faithful Yaqui aide coming into camp from the opposite side, and tried to warn them back with a slight shake of his head. But neither man slowed his grim advance on the lynch mob.

"Morgan," Jeff Kedrick said savagely, "this is yore last chance to talk!"

IT WAS then that Navajo Raine pulled his guns.

"I'll do Morgan's talkin' for him," he called out bleakly. "Get away from that crate, Kedrick!"

His words were like whips lashing every man around the hang-tree. They spun, reaching for guns, only to freeze at the deadly threat of Raine's weapons. The Ranger's cold smile added to the weight of the danger he piled against them.

"You gents might behave a little better if yuh knew a friend of mine has yuh whipsawed from behind. Hawk, if any man makes a funny move, see that he gets sorry plumb quick!"

It was sheer bluff, and Navajo Raine knew it. He couldn't entirely blame the lumber-

men for what they wanted to do to man they believed to be a murderer. And Raine knew he couldn't shoot to kill if they forced his bluff.

Then Jacob Kern brought things to a head, his brittle laugh cutting through the silence.

"Raine, yuh're tryin' to play a pair of deuces against a full house!" he mocked. "Half of my men and Kedrick's men are facin' yuh, and the other half is ready to take care of yore Injun friend. Yuh can't live to stop this hangin', and yuh know it!"

"Mebbe I'm not tryin' to stop the hangin'," Raine answered grimly.

He saw a look of surprise cross Wayne Morgan's face, the frown that pinched Jacob Kern's brows. Uncertainty that was not far from open distrust struck Blue Hawk.

Violence had been ready to explode at the least word or act, but now hard-eyed men stared at the Arizona Ranger with a new interest. No expression was in Raine's face as he sheathed his guns, and he heard the faint edge of derision that was in Jacob Kern's low chuckle.

"Danged if Burt Mossman's top Ranger ain't with us in this!" the man crowed.

Navajo Raine spoke calmly through the waiting silence.

"I've got to admit all evidence is against this man Morgan. Old Sam Kedrick named Morgan as his murderer, accordin' to the ledger in Kedrick's office, and you men are actin' as a court in passin' judgment on this hombre. I want it as a matter of written record that yuh all voted and condemned Morgan to death."

The Yaqui Indian shifted his rifle toward Raine in sudden vicious hatred.

"Don't do it, Hawk!" Wayne Morgan called out sharply.

Navajo Raine stood quietly while slips of paper were passed to all of the men. Jacob Kern collected the votes, and delivered them to the lawman.

"There they are, Ranger, all signed and proper. If I know these men, yuh won't find one vote against this lynchin'."

Raine didn't. He read each verdict that had been signed by the waiting men. All of them pronounced Wayne Morgan guilty of murder, sentenced to hang until dead. The Arizona Ranger strode past Jeff Kedrick to the crate under the pine limb.

Now that their votes had been cast, the men were growing impatient. Raine silenced them with a jerk of his hand, and when he spoke a cold and driving force was behind each word.

"Not one of yuh voted to spare Wayne Morgan's life. Yuh ought to be plumb proud of yoreselves for considerin' it yore right to pass judgment on whether this man lives or dies." He used every trick he knew of tone and word to cut them to the core. "If yuh'd lynched Wayne Morgan, yuh'd been as guilty of murder as the man who shot Sam Kedrick to death!"

Murmurs of anger came from the lumbermen. Jacob Kern's men, half a dozen hard-visaged individuals, began fanning out, puzzled by this sudden change, warned of a danger they knew was coming but couldn't understand.

Jake Kern cursed savagely. "So now yuh're on the other side of the fence!" he accused, and there was a deadly threat behind his words. Navajo Tom Raine pulled a crumpled envelope from his pocket, handed it to Jeff Kedrick.

"Look at this close, Kedrick! Yuh ought to recoghize it as yore father's handwriting. Look how he spelled Wayne Morgan's name—W-a-y-n-e."

Then Raine handed one of the death ballots to the young lumberman.

"Now look at this, Kedrick! This was written by a man who has been playin' you and Luke Crosser against each other. He wanted yuh to ruin Crosser in a range war so's he could take over the Three C. Look how he wrote Morgan's first name—W-a-i-n-e—the same way he wrote it with yore father's blood on the company ledger!"

RAINE let the full impact of his contempt strike Jacob Kern as he glared at the man.

"If yuh want it plainer, Kern, when yuh tried to frame Morgan for murder, yuh misspelled yoreself into a hang-noose!"

Kern's move was as sudden as though something had snapped inside him, blood and voice and hand leaping at once.

"Get him, men!"

Navajo Raine felt the whip of the killer's close-passing slug as his own weapons swept up.

"Morgan—catch!" he yelled to the man on the packing crate, and with his left hand sent a gun spinning through the air to the man he knew to be the Masked Rider.

He faded to one side of Kern's second savage shot. He fired once, and then he fired again, throwing each slug with the sure care of a man hunter methodically doing a job. Jake Kern went down, but other killers were still up, cursing and yelling through the roar of their shots, until suddenly it was all over.

Blue Hawk brought the Arizona Ranger's horse out of the pines, and they swung into saddle while old Luke Crosser rubbed his wrists where the ropes had chafed them.

"Kedrick," the old rancher said, "I reckon yuh owe me a good healthy boot in the britches, and I'd be proud to have yuh pay off here and now. Jake Kern may have done all the dirty work against yuh this last year, but I shore done my share of talkin'."

Jeff Kedrick smiled. "Forget it, Luke. Mebbe one of these days I can sell yuh a load of lumber. Yuh ought to have a barn if yuh want to keep yore ranch up-to-date."

A grin spread over Luke Crosser's rugged, reddened face.

"A barn I might be able to stand," he growled. "But danged if yuh can make me like one of them new-fangled tely-phones."

"They're mighty handy things to have when yuh need 'em," Jeff Kedrick drawled. "They're better'n the fastest hoss."

Interest stirred in Crosser's faded eyes. "That so? Well, I might have a look at the critter."

As Kedrick and Crosser went to the unfinished telephone line, Navajo Tom Raine rode along, followed by Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk. Kedrick began attaching loose wires to their proper posts, connecting the battery box.

"Mebbe I can return the favor some time," the Masked Rider said softly to Raine, glancing away from the men now absorbed in something far removed from lynchings.

Navajo Raine smiled queerly. "Danged if I ever thought I'd save an outlaw's life just to see him ride free," he drawled. "What this territory needs is a few more outlaws like you, Morgan."

Jeff Kedrick swung the handle on the telephone box sharply. He pulled old Luke Crosser close.

"I figger yuh'd like to tell Sheriff Benbolt all this trouble is over," Kedrick suggested.

"Plumb into town?" Crosser said, in amazement, and when Kedrick nodded, the rancher pulled a deep breath into his lungs.

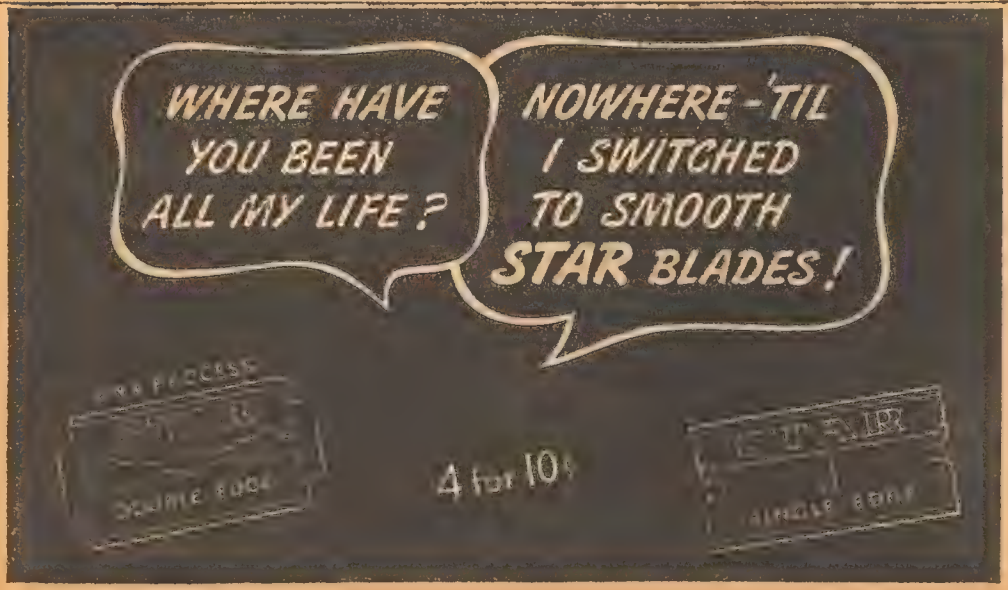
"Yuh don't have to yell," Jeff Kedrick said quickly.

"Is that so!" Luke Crosser said belligerently. "When I want to talk to a gent ten miles away, I take in a deep breath and beller like Billy-be-hanged!"

NAVAJO RAINE SETTLES THE DIABLO VALLEY FEUD IN

# NOT BY A DAM SITE

AN ACTION-PACKED NOVELET COMING NEXT ISSUE



Paige struggled up on one elbow and fired

# CHEYENNE DEATH TRAP

## By REEVE WALKER

*Pony Express Rider Alamo Paige Rides into Savage Battle Against the Evil Scheme of a Renegade Killer!*

NIGHT wind shouldered roughly against the weathered boards of the Twin Oaks relay station, fifteen miles from Cheyenne, on the far-flung Pony Express route that covered the American wilderness from Missouri to California. Rugged mountain stringers hemmed in the station on the north and east. But to the south and west the country fell away in a series of rolling hills.

Lamplight, streaming from the front window of the crude log structure which housed the Mail station, threw into sharp silhouette the figures of two men standing in the yard. Behind them a well and watering trough were indistinct blurs in the darkness. Farther on, sixty yards from the post building, horses romped back and forth within the confines of a peeled pole corral.

Neither man paid any attention to the horses in the corral. Both were staring toward the winding trail that ran between Kimball and Cheyenne.

"What do yuh think happened to Josh

Raines, Alamo?" brawny, good-natured Pete Wilmer, the station agent, asked the jockey-sized man beside him. "He's twenty minutes late."

"Alamo" Paige, top-string rider of the Pony Express, frowned. He was a short man and compactly built. There was a deceptive breadth to his shoulders, and his wrists and hands were unusually large for a man of his small stature. As he stood there he hefted the handle of his Dragoon .44 which reposed in a basket-weave holster thonged against his right hip.

"Yore guess is as good as mine," he replied to the agent, and suddenly held up a hand. "Wait! I hear a hoss!"

"Yuh're right, Alamo," Wilmer agreed, tensely listening. "If it's Raines, he's shore takin' his time. That hoss ain't hurryin' none."

Paige said nothing, but a feeling of alarm had shot through him. Tugging his flop-brimmed hat lower over his dark blue eyes, he ran forward into the darkness. He had covered thirty yards before he sighted the horse cantering toward the relay station.

"It's Josh, all right, Pete!" Paige yelled over his shoulder. "Looks like he's been hurt!"

A buckskin pony clattered along the trail. Raines' body was a limp, shapeless mound in the saddle. He was bent over the buckskin's mane, his fingers locked in the coarse hair.

PAIGE reached the buckskin in swift leaps. He grabbed the bridle as Wilmer came panting up. Together they led the pony into the yard, then lowered Raines to the ground.

Even before Paige saw Raines' glazed, sightless eyes and the pallor of his skin, he knew that his fellow rider was dead.

"Too late," he muttered. "Raines is gone."

Hunkering down beside Raines, Paige gently turned the man over on his side.

"Shot twice through the back," Alamo said grimly, and suddenly the misery that had gripped him changed to a torrid rage. "Josh Raines never had a chance! A rifle done this job, Pete! The slugs tore clean through him."

Paige stood up. The glitter in his eyes bespoke his true feelings more than his words.

"Josh started with me on the Pony Express," he said slowly. "He was one of my best pards. If it's the last thing I do, I'll settle with his bushwhackers."

Wilmer had moved back to Raines' pony. Now he yelled to Paige.

"Here's a hunk of paper that was stuck to Raines' saddle!"

Paige took the paper from Wilmer. A crudely printed message which covered the wrinkled sheet read:

Thanks for the five thousand in cash. You can have the mail back. It's no good to us. You can have Josh Raines, too—for burying.

Paige crushed the note in his fist, and the expression in his face now was a dangerous one. Three strides took him to the buckskin. He jerked the bullhide mochilas from the saddle, but was not surprised at what he saw. Both mail containers had been slit open, but none of the letters had been tampered with except the thick manilla envelope addressed to the Cheyenne Pony Express office. It was this envelope which most likely had contained the five thousand dollars.

The empty envelope which deliberately had been tossed back into the mochilas by the owlhooters seemed to mock Alamo Paige. Wordlessly, he stepped to his own waiting black, vaulted into the saddle.

"Wait!" cried Wilmer. "Yuh're forgettin' the mochilas."

"Pete," called Paige, "I'm goin' to leave Josh to you. I reckon he'll understand my wantin' to count coup on his killers. Dig a grave upon the knoll behind the corral. You'd better pack the mail the rest of the way into Cheyenne. Tell Ed Brian, the agent there, about Josh and the stolen dinero. He can put Bill Hume, the relief rider I've been breakin' in all week, to finish the rest of my route to Kirkland."

"But where are you goin'?" Wilmer demanded.

"Back toward Kimball where Raines came from," Alamo Paige snapped. He appeared to be cool and determined enough, but beneath that exterior a fierce excitement boiled. "I'll be servin' Russel, Majors and Waddell just as well if I land Josh's killers and get that money back."

Wilmer nodded silently, then watched Paige whirl his fleet black pony and speed off into the night.

Moccasined heels digging into the animal's flanks, the Mail rider struck the first long grade into timber without any slackening of pace. After ten minutes the trail dropped into a low-walled pass rimmed by brush.

Paige pulled the black in. He watched each mound of rock, each clump of brush. This was good ambush country. He was positive that it was somewhere in this area that Josh Raines had been attacked.

As the moon's silver crescent broke through a rift in the clouds an eerie brilliance spread over the chaparral. And with it came an intangible threat of peril. There was a hollow, strained feeling inside of him as he noticed that before him the canyon floor widened. He began to wonder if the note on Raines' saddle had been bait for a trap. A trap designed to lure him to the same bushwhack death!

Suddenly he believed his canny instinct was right when a horse whinnied a few yards be-

hind and to the right of him. Brush crackled sharply. He hauled back on the reins. His right hand stabbed toward his Dragoon .44.

Too late he heard the warning hiss of a rope swishing through space. A noose settled over his head, dropped to his upper arms, pinning them to his sides.

A savage jerk on the rope hauled Alamo Paige out of saddle. He toppled to the ground. For a moment the lariat loosened and instantly his right hand sped to his holster.

Twenty yards away a horse and rider spurred out of the brush. Paige's gun swept from leather in a smooth blur of speed. But the rope tightened, heaving him upon his chest as the drygulcher's gun exploded in a fiery blossom of flame. Hot lead churned past Paige's ear. He struggled up on one elbow. He centered his sights on the wavering figure in front of him and squeezed the trigger.

IMMEDIATELY the rope again slackened its pressure around Paige's arms. The ambusher stood in his stirrups, then fell sideward to the ground.

Alamo Paige freed himself from the rope and ran forward. He cocked his gun, prepared to shoot again. It was not necessary. The drygulcher was dead. Paige's bullet had entered his chest right above the heart.

The man was bearded, heavy-browed and coarse-featured—a total stranger to the Mail rider. With a caution born of long experience, Paige scanned the trail, waiting to see if the ambusher had any friends. Three minutes passed without any further challenge.

Satisfied that the outlaw had been alone, Paige bent down to search his victim's clothing. In the pocket of his flannel shirt he found a folded paper with a message scrawled on it. It was a brief note to one Ed Garth—evidently this drygulcher—some weeks ago and sent by Pony Express from Cheyenne to St. Joseph, Missouri. It read:

Dear Ed:

Come to Cheyenne pronto. Some good prospects lined up here. Easy money and plenty of it. Maybe a chance to get back at some of my Pony Express friends. You know who I mean.

Brad Dekker

A spark of excitement leaped through Alamo Paige when he came to the signature. Brad Dekker! He knew the man. A former Pony Express rider who had violated the rigid pledge of the company, then had turned thief and renegade, robbing his own mochilas.

Alamo Paige and Josh Raines had been instrumental in exposing Dekker and sending him to prison. That had been eight months ago. Only now did Paige remember the rumors he had heard concerning Dekker's escape from prison. The rumors were obviously true for Dekker was around again—and seeking revenge!

Raines must have blundered into an ambush of Dekker's owlhooters. They had taken the money from the mochilas, then left Garth on the spot to wait for whoever rose to the bait contained in that note tied to Raines' saddle.

Knowing the close bond of friendship between the two Mail riders, and knowing that Paige was due to relieve Raines, Dekker had counted on Paige coming back to hunt Raines' killers.

But the ambush had failed. They had underestimated Alamo Paige in leaving only one man behind to capture the Mail rider. Now Paige was free—free to go after Brad Dekker. And since the letter mailed to Ed Garth had been sent from Cheyenne, that was where Paige decided he would find the renegade leader. . . .

Cheyenne's night life was in full swing when the Pony Mail rider reached the rugged frontier settlement. Big, four-horse freighters rumbled through the deep ruts of the main street, churning up clouds of dust. From every saloon came the shouts and laughter of men, the clink of glasses, the occasional tinny clangor of a piano.

Dismounting in front of the Pony Express office, Paige rushed inside. Big Ed Brian got up quickly from his desk behind the board counter. He had a fat-cheeked, ruddy face and pale blue eyes with deep shadows beneath them.

"Was Pete Wilmer here?" Paige demanded brusquely.

"Yeah." Brian scowled. Some of the ruddiness went out of his cheeks. "Too bad about Josh. I liked him a lot."

"No more than I did. He was my best friend and I know who was responsible for his death. Brad Dekker."

"You mean the Pony Mail rider who used to be on the Baxter-Sanderson run?" demanded Brian.

"The same," Paige said, his voice low and grim. "And I'm shore he's right here in Cheyenne."

Brian's pale blue eyes widened with interest.

"Then yuh picked up some sign after leavin' Wilmer?" he queried.

"More than sign. After back-trackin' along Josh Raine's trail I ran into an ambush. One of Dekker's owlhooters tried to rope me out of the saddle, but I gunned him down. Dekker left him behind, I reckon, to trap the man who came in answer to that note on Raines' saddle."

Paige fumbled in a shirt pocket, drew out the letter he had taken from Ed Garth. He handed it to Brian.

"Read this," he said briefly. "It's from Dekker to the gent who tried to rope me. When yuh're finished I think yuh'll agree

that Dekker is holed up somewheres in town."

Paige turned and walked to the door. Brian's quick call made him pause.

"Where are you headin', Alamo?"

"I'm goin' after Dekker and that five thousand dollars."

"Hold on, Alamo." Brian's wide lips tightened. "That ain't yore job. I'll get the marshal—"

"I'm makin' it my job," Paige said quietly. He was cold and resolute. There was no compromise, no softness in his eyes. And none in his voice. "Don't forget, Josh was my friend. I aim to settle this thing myself without help."

THERE was a worried look in Brian's face.

"I understand how yuh feel," he murmured, "but I still don't like it. You don't know how many gunnies Dekker has sidin' him."

"I don't know and I don't care," snapped Alamo Paige and walked out of the office.

Lamplight glittered from dusty store and saloon windows. The street was alive with a moving tide of men and wagons and horses. A stiff wind came down out of the hills and stirred up the dust in the interlacing ruts.

Tiny particles of dirt lashed Paige's cheeks. There was a raw, cutting edge to the wind. But Alamo was aware of neither wind nor dust. At the moment he looked thoroughly hard and tough. Rash impulses goaded him. There was room for only one thing in his mind. He wanted to find Brad Dekker.

With dogged persistence he prowled Cheyenne's streets, visiting one saloon after another. Not until he reached a deserted section of town frequented by gamblers and hardcases did he find his man.

He had entered a gloomy, smoke-filled saloon. There were only three men in the room, including the bartender. Brad Dekker, drinking alone at the bar, was one of the other two occupants. The ex-Pony Express jockey's dark hair was sleekly combed back from a narrow forehead, and his brown eyes were half veiled by thick lids.

Paige halted beside the bat-wing doors. His nerves tingled as he realized that in short order that place likely would be the scene of violent action. He saw Dekker turn, saw the hot rush of recognition in Dekker's eyes.

"Hello, Paige," drawled Dekker. He lowered the whisky glass in his hand to the bar. "Lookin' for somebody?"

For a moment Dekker appeared uneasy and alarmed. Then he smiled. But behind the smile flickered a hatred that nothing could alter.

Paige's answer was low and deadly, a deliberate challenge as his words shot across the room.

"Yeah, Dekker. I'm lookin' for you."

Dekker's long, sallow face registered surprise. But Paige saw how wariness narrowed the man's brown eyes and thinned the falsely smiling lips.

"What for?" Dekker asked.

His voice, too, was low. Yet the strained sound of it echoed back from the walls in a silence that was ominous.

The bartender moved nearer. His round, moon-face was hostile. Paige ignored him, letting his attention slide past Dekker to the pale-skinned man seated at a card table. The man was occupied with a poker deck. He never glanced up. Yet instinct warned the Pony Mail rider that the card player was primed for trouble.

"Quit stallin', Dekker," Paige rasped. He strode across the room, without hesitation and without hurrying. "I'm here to square accounts for Josh Raines."

"I don't know what yuh're talkin' about," Dekker insisted.

Paige gestured impatiently with his left arm. This was the moment for which he had waited. Nothing could stop him now.

"No time to argue with yuh," he snapped. "Make yore pass or die."

Dekker's right arm jerked. Paige palmed his Dragoon .44, swung it up. Abruptly the card player moved. As his right hand vanished beneath the table, Dekker stepped back, not drawing.

Paige leaped against the bar. He swiveled his gun around as the card player slid out of his chair and upended the table. A gun flamed above the table edge. Paige was hardly aware of the bullet thudding into the mahogany behind him. He notched his sights on a white wedge of forehead behind that bucking gun and let go with his own answering shot. A dark hole punctured the card player's forehead. He dropped out of sight.

There was movement behind the bar. Paige started to turn. Dekker yelled, then, drawing Paige's attention as he charged toward the Mail rider. At the same instant Paige caught the flash of the bartender's downswinging arm. Almost at once something struck the back of his head.

He staggered forward, hands waving blindly in empty space. Then all resistance washed out of him and he slumped to the floor. . . .

When he regained consciousness he was in a large barnlike room in which were half a dozen straight-backed chairs. A smoky lantern propped on a rough-hewn table provided the only illumination. The room was an abandoned store room, Alamo thought.

Brad Dekker and another man stood a few paces away, regarding the Pony Mail rider with a malicious enjoyment.

"Well, Paige," murmured Dekker, "you always were the one to play a lone hand. This time yore luck ran out."

"I came here to kill you, Dekker," Paige told him bluntly. "I still mean to do it."

"Yuh'll never get the chance. This is the payoff. Josh Raines was first. Yuh're next."

A DOOR opened behind Dekker. A lanky pasty-faced individual emerged from a smaller, faintly illuminated room. He was carrying a glass filled with a colorless liquid in one hand, and two small bottles in the other hand.

"Did yuh get the stuff?" Dekker asked eagerly.

"Yeah. There's belladonna here and some other things."

Dekker grabbed the two bottles from the lanky outlaw. He glanced at the labels. The smaller bottle contained about a dozen white tablets.

"Heck, yuh've got some strychnine tablets here and some spirits of ammonia. I just wanted belladonna."

"I know," growled the other man uneasily. "I was just stealin' the belladonna from Doc Miltner's shelf in the room behind his office when he came in the front door. I had to move fast. I knocked some things over next to the belladonna. I grabbed all the stuff and vamosed."

"Clumsy fool!" Dekker said, his face darkening with rage. Anybody see yuh?"

"No. I got away clear." The lanky man indicated the glass of colorless liquid. "I mixed that stuff accordin' to directions on the label."

Dekker nodded surlily and drew his gun. He faced Paige with a wicked grin.

"Remember when you and Raines got me thrown out of the Pony Express for robbin' the mails?" he inquired gently. "I said I'd get even with yuh both. Raines is already dead. But I've got somethin' special planned for you—somethin' I found out about while I was in the pen.

"Since I busted out, I learned through a clerk in the Cheyenne office that plenty of money has been comin' into town every day. It's to be used for repairin' relay stations farther west and for buyin' new horses. Must be quite a heap of dinero in Ed Brian's office by this time. At least, that's what my friend, Tod Ellwood here, who got fired by Brian last week, told me."

Dekker paused to indicate the squat, heavy-set man beside him. The ex-clerk had a pock-marked face and hollow, calculating eyes.

"Lucky for me," Dekker went on, "that I never had the Cheyenne-Kimball run. Nobody knows me here or even recognizes me as an ex-Mail rider. But you and the Pony Express are goin' to pay for the months I spent in the pen. Me and my pards are goin' to raid Brian's office tonight. And you'll be helpin' us."

"Like blazes I will!" Paige retorted.

"There are ways and ways," Dekker said laconically. He switched the gun to his left hand, turned back to the table. Ellwood, meanwhile, covered Paige with his .44. When Dekker faced Paige again he was holding the glass of colorless liquid. "Yuh're goin' to drink this here belladonna. After it starts workin' inside of yuh, yuh'll be so bleary-eyed and with such a don't-give-a-hoot feelin' yuh won't be able to help yoreself."

Paige sprang from the chair, ignoring the guns that menaced him. He struck out at Dekker's arm. The rider turned outlaw stepped back, avoided the blow. Immediately, Ellwood and the other renegade pounced on the Mail rider and forced him back to the chair.

"Yuh're not givin' me any of that stuff!" Paige roared as he struggled to get free.

Dekker pouched his .44. While his two men wrestled with Alamo Paige, he transferred the belladonna to his left hand and moved into the fray. Deliberately he waited for an opening. When he saw it his right arm shot out. Bunched knuckles cascaded against Paige's jaw.

The Mail rider fell backward. He sank weakly to the chair. Almost at once it seemed to him that there was an oddly steep pitch to the floor. Faces and objects in the room began to gyrate crazily. His arms were pinned behind him. Dekker forced his mouth open and poured the belladonna down his throat.

Paige gasped and choked, trying to keep from swallowing. But the effort was futile. He stopped struggling. The outlaws withdrew, watching him warily.

"Nothin' yuh can do now, amigo," chided Dekker, his rugged features glowing with brutal satisfaction. "I could have had yuh killed right away, but that'd be too easy for yuh. Shore, yuh've got a big rep in Cheyenne. But after tonight the whole town will be brandin' yuh as a renegade and skunk.

"I'm goin' to let the town kill yuh. Once that belladonna takes hold of yore muscles yuh'll be little better than a bunch of rags. Yuh'll hate us and try to resist, but like I said yuh won't be able to help yoreself. Yet to Ed Brian and anybody else in that Pony Express it's goin' to look like yuh've turned owlhooter. And after we've looted Brian's safe, I'll see that yuh're left behind as buzzard bait for Cheyenne to pick over."

PAIGE sat straight and still and made no reply. His bronzed features looked bleak and unyielding. He considered the viciousness of Dekker's carefully contrived frame-up with a coldness and detachment that masked the surge of his angry emotions.

Five minutes dragged by. Then ten minutes more. The outlaws lingered in the room, never relaxing their vigilance. They were like vultures hovering above desert carrion. They watched him with a hungry impatience, waiting for the drug to take effect.

The shadows in the room seemed to be coiling into knots. Grotesque and crooked, they slid waveringly up and down the walls.

A gray film dropped over Paige's eyes. He noticed that objects in the room began to fray off at the edges. He shook his head to clear his vision. He shifted in the chair and was amazed at the length of time required to complete that movement.

A dreadful listlessness was creeping over his muscles. It was like a stifling flood inundating his entire system. His eyelids became heavy. The drug was sapping his energy, his resistance.

Cold sweat cracked through Paige's skin. There was an empty washed-out feeling inside of him. He knew enough about belladonna, without Dekker's taunting prophecy, to realize what would happen to him. He knew, because he knew that was the name doctors used for the deadly nightshade, with which anybody out here was familiar.

The lethargy he was experiencing would increase. The will to fight, to resist would remain. But the belladonna would render his muscles incapable of heeding the commands of his brain. He would become an animated dummy at the complete mercy of Dekker and his gun-slingers.

He stared dismally at the bottles on the table. Then hope flared briefly within him. There was a chance to break out of this trap. But did he have enough strength to make the attempt?

The question ran its brittle disturbance through Paige, leaving him desperate. Yet, slim as the chance was, he had to take it. And if it worked he would have to thank his long-standing friendship with Doc Miltner, Cheyenne's elderly sawbones, and the memory of the talks he'd had with Doc about deadly nightshade.

Dekker turned away from Paige to speak to Ellwood. Paige left his chair in a surprise leap that he had meant to be swift, but which was somehow labored and awkward.

Dekker whirled around, saw the Mail rider charging him. The outlaw's gun lifted, chopped down toward Paige. Paige's rush carried him against Dekker. His shoulder struck the outlaw's chest, drove him sideward even as Dekker's gun barrel grazed Paige's arm.

Then Paige lurched against the table. One sweep of his left hand knocked the lamp to the floor. There was a bright glow of flame, a crash of splintered glass before darkness descended upon the room.

With a feverish haste Paige's hand quested across the table. His fingers closed about the bottle containing the aromatic spirits of ammonia just as someone lurched against the table and upended it.

The bottle of strychnine tablets fell to the puncheon floor and broke. A bony fist grazed Paige's cheek. A hurtling body struck him behind the knees, sent him sprawling on his face.

"Don't shoot!" Dekker yelled to his men.

The outlaw's order told Paige that this store room must be right in the heart of town if he didn't wish to risk the noise of a shot. Then he was groping along the floor for strychnine tablets from the smashed bottle.

He found one tablet near the broken frame of the lamp. Quickly he shoved the tablet into his mouth, uncorked the ammonia bottle and took a swallow. Suddenly two bodies hit him. He rolled over slowly, threw the bottle away from him. It splintered against the wall. The reek of the medicinal ammonia set him coughing, and the outlaws with him.

Fists began pummeling his face and body. At first, he struggled, striking back at his attackers with blows that were feeble and ineffectual. They overpowered him after two minutes and hauled him to his feet. Someone stumbled out of the room and returned with another lantern. It was Dekker. He scowled at Paige. The scowl changed to a triumphant grin when he glimpsed Paige's bedraggled appearance.

"I reckon yuh've shot yore bolt, Paige," he said. "But we'll wait ten minutes more to make shore."

At Dekker's signal the two outlaws forced the Mail rider back into the chair. All the fight had gone out of him. He sat loosely, shoulders slumped, narrowed eyes blinking wearily at the renegades. He moved an arm to wipe sweat from his forehead. The effort required so much time that Dekker laughed.

"Time to go, gents," he murmured. "That belladonna's done its work. Friend Alamo will just about be able to stand up when we start that raid. Won't Ed Brian be surprised!"

DEKKER and Ellwood hauled Paige out of his chair, led him through a darkened rear room to four saddled horses picketed beneath a cottonwood. They boosted Paige into the hull. Dekker swung aboard a horse and drew up beside the Mail rider, then gave the signal to proceed.

They rode slowly through the darkness that shrouded this deserted section of Cheyenne. Following back streets, they continued past empty stores and barns until they came to a narrow alley.

They turned up the alley and left their horses a dozen feet from the main street. Dekker helped Paige from the saddle. He staggered when his boots struck the earth. Dekker steadied him. The outlaw's laugh was low, amused.

They were, Alamo saw, in the alley next to the Pony Express office. Paige decided that the hour was late since some of the saloons had closed. No one appeared on the

board walks. But there was a light in the office as they stepped to the porch.

Dekker, one hand under Paige's elbow, shoved a gun into the jockey's fist.

"Here's a gun, Alamo," whispered the outlaw. "Don't count on it bein' loaded, though."

Then all four men were hitting the unlocked door, smashing it open and shouldering into the office. Ed Brian, busy with account sheets at his desk, rose hurriedly. Dekker's rasping voice froze him into immobility.

"Lift yore dewclaws, Brian! This is a hold-up. Get over to that safe pronto and open it up. Alamo Paige says there's plenty of dinero inside. And he should know."

The mention of Paige's name shifted Brian's attention to the slumped, wavering figure almost hidden by Dekker's broad shape.

"Alamo!" thundered Brian. His voice was hoarse with shock. His eyes widened at the sight of the Mail rider regarding him through blinking eyes. A gun hung limply from Paige's fingers. "What yuh doin' with these—"

"Paige is workin' with us," broke in Dekker. "His cut out of this haul will give him more cash than he could earn in three years workin' for the Pony Express. Hurry, Brian! Open that safe!"

Ellwood and the other outlaw moved ahead to the railing, their weapons centered on Brian. Growling and cursing, Brian shuffled to the safe. Dekker grinned and stared at Alamo Paige.

Suddenly that grin turned to a horrible grimace of surprise. Fear muddied Dekker's eyes. A strangled shout burst from his throat.

Paige was no longer an animated dummy. His eyes looked clear. He straightened out of his slouch. All of his movements were swift and sure now. He flung himself at Dekker. The empty gun which had dangled so limply from his fist rose and fell in a short arc.

The long barrel slammed against Dekker's skull before the renegade could swivel his gun around to Paige. Reeling drunkenly for a brief moment, the escaped thief finally bent at the middle and collapsed to the floor. Paige dropped with him as Ellwood whirled from the railing near Brian's desk and put a shot in the space where Paige's head had been.

"Get down, Ed!" Paige warned shrilly, as Brian lunged for his belt and gun hanging from a hook above the safe.

Ellwood fired again and missed. Then Paige's fingers closed around the butt of Dekker's gun which had fallen from the outlaw's hand. Propped up on one knee, Paige brought up the .44 and dropped hammer on a squalling shot. He felt the recoil of the weapon kick against his wrist. But he was too busy to think about it, for he was watching Ellwood clutch at his reddening shirt front.

Ellwood staggered two steps and toppled against his partner. That accidental collision spoiled the other outlaw's shot at Brian, and the bullet meant for Brian's back merely slashed his ribs.

The force of the heavy-calibered slug tearing through his flesh spun Brian against the wall. His hands groped for the belt and gun above him. He caught the belt and was pulling it down when Paige's yell pulled Ellwood's outlaw pard around.

The renegade fired as he turned. But Paige was moving out of the way. He had got to his feet, leaped to one side. Then, halting momentarily to center his sights on the outlaw, he squeezed the trigger. The outlaw's bullet droned harmlessly past him. But lead from his own gun drilled through the outlaw's chest, sent him crashing to the floor.

Brian stumbled through the low gate in the railing that separated the outer office from the smaller inner one where the desk and safe were located.

"That was some fancy shootin', Alamo!" he breathed. "Yuh shore had me fooled. For a while I thought yuh really was helpin' them buzzards—though yuh looked mighty queer. What happened?"

"I found Dekker without any trouble," said the jockey-sized Mail rider, "but first off I bit off more'n I could chew." He recounted the fight in the saloon. "While I was tallyin' that card player the bartender beefed me. When I came to they drugged me and dragged me along on this raid. The drug was supposed to make me helpless."

"Yuh shore did look helpless or drunk—I couldn't tell which—till yuh started yore fireworks."

BRIAN'S eyes were puzzled and curious. He started to ask another question, but Paige cut him off.

"Dekker wanted it to look like I'd turned owlhooter," he said. "Then they was goin' to see to it that I was left behind after the raid so I'd be hangnoose bait for the mob."

Behind Paige, Dekker stirred. A low moan escaped from him. Then he began cursing savagely.

"That jasper's got a hard head," Brian observed, finally slumping into a chair to have a look at the shallow wound in his side. "Yuh should have killed him."

"I'd rather see him hang," Paige said bluntly.

Dekker's dark, malevolent glance seemed to burn right through Alamo Paige.

"Blast yuh, Paige," he growled hoarsely. "Yuh tricked me. The belladonna yuh drank should have kept yuh hobbled for hours." He was bewildered and angry at the same time.

*(Concluded on page 75)*

Was the horse really the killer?

# KILLER ON THE RANGE

## By MEL PITZER

*A Horse Can't Speak in Defense of Himself—but Ranch Foreman Buck Brenner Is a Good Advocate for the Accused!*

I REMEMBER that night, at dusk, when Rance Elton and his boys bring in the Morgan stallion from the freight yards. Rance has bought him from a Wyoming stockman to use for stud, as we've heard that sons and daughters with the Morgan strain are far above the average in speed, stamina and strength. Rance is providing the Army with cavalry stock and for that reason is trying to raise a stronger and more sturdy breed, for he knows that the Government will pay more for better horses.

The stallion, big-boned, big-chested, with a beautiful head, is as black as night. He is snubbed to the saddle pummels of four riders and every muscle in his big body quivers as his velvety nostrils sniff his new and strange surroundings.

When they bring him into the ranch-yard, Rance, a straight-backed man of fifty, with sharp gray eyes and a wealth of silvery hair and flowing mustache to match, which give him a dignified appearance, calls me over from the bunkhouse.

"Buck," he says, "yuh've been manager of my Cedar Valley Ranch for a good many years, and yuh're the best judge of horseflesh I know. Take a good look at Black Thunder here and tell me what yuh read in him."

I nod and walk over to the stallion's head and look into his eyes. There's everything to be seen in a horse's eyes, if you know how to read what you see. I mean that some have a jagged streak of lighting blazing from them, when they're killers; others, whose spirits are broken, sometimes seem to have a

sorta film covering their eyes.

This beauty of sixteen hands just looks out at the world through two dark-brown luminous eyes. I can't read anything in them. I put my hand on the gloss of his neck and gradually he stops quivering. The whites of his eyes, which had been showing, begin to disappear. He's a stranger in a strange place and wants a little friendship. That's the way I read the stallion. He begins to nibble at my sleeve.

"He's got a will of his own, Rance," I say, "and can take things into his own hands if he wants to. Then again, treat him gentle and yuh won't have any trouble with Black Thunder, far as I can see."

Rance turns to the boys who are waiting in the saddle.

"You boys hear Buck Brenner," he says, "and he ain't ever far wrong in things. Treat the stallion right and yuh'll have no trouble with him."

"I don't know about that," says Dave Holden, one of the four who has brung in the stallion.

DAVE is a slender, waspish gent, with a narrow, leathery-looking face. Dark-eyed, dark-haired and not bad looking on the whole, he's been with the outfit only two months and at times is a bit too outspoken. The rest of the boys never cottoned to him, but he can handle horses and that's what counts on the ranch.

"Yuh don't know about what?" quickly asks the boss, his brows pinching together, like they always do when he's annoyed.

"About that hoss bein' as gentle as Buck Brenner makes him out to be," Dave answers.

"What does he look like to you?" asks Rance.

"A killer!"

Rance laughs and waves his hand. "Forget it, Dave," he says. "That stallion ain't no killer. He might be a bit wild, but I feel he's just what Buck says he is. You boys take him into the new box-stall and tomorrow mornin' let him ramble around in the corral we built especially for him. Let him get used to things around here. Treat him gentle, like Buck says."

The kind of service I put in on Elton's Cedar Valley Ranch these many years, has earned me the privilege of eating at the table in the main house. So later that same day Rance and his brother Frank and me are at the table in the big, old-fashioned dining-room.

Frank is a few years younger than Rance. He's a big-jawed, big-shouldered, easy-going hombre who, on account of having one leg crippled, don't take much physical interest in the place. He looks after the bookkeeping, finances, supplies and that sort of thing.

We're talking mostly about the new stallion, when the front door bangs open and Jim Elton, Ran's cousin, comes in. Jim is the black sheep of the family. He's always been wild and many times before Old Man Elton, father of Rance and Frank, and brother of Jim's father—the old man died six months before—had hot arguments with Jim about mending his ways and settling down to handle the ranch with Rance and Frank.

Jim pays no attention to these talks, but spends his money and time in the town's saloons. Finally he goes into partnership with a saloon owner and, though he still lives at the ranch, he is just tolerated, but that's about all.

Jim isn't bad-looking. He is big, with a youngish-old face, if you get what I mean. His eyes are set a little too close together to suit me.

As he walks in now, we see he's a bit under the influence of liquor. He sits down and Josh, the colored cook, begins to serve him. Jim starts eating and Rance gets up and nods his head toward the other room. We follow him out and leave Jim alone.

When we get into the living room, Rance says:

"Jim is a bit too friendly with Dave Holden. That's why I didn't want to talk in front of him. The thing I want to know, Buck, is this: Why do yuh suppose Holden insisted that hoss is a killer when he seems so gentle? Yuh shore he ain't a bad one, Buck? I ain't wantin' him to cripple or mebbe kill any of the boys."

Well, when Rance asks me this, I start to remember the many kinds of horses I've met, their actions and what they looked like—geldings, bays, stallions, roans, duns, paints, all kinds of critters. Then I get the picture of Black Thunder as clear in my mind as I can, what the rancher we bought him from had written us about his dam and sire and all that sort of thing. I'd looked at the horse with these things in mind, coupled with my knowledge and experience and I don't want to do a thing to spoil my reputation of being one of the best judges of horseflesh in the State of Texas.

"Frank, and you, Rance," I say at last, "I'm telling yuh both that Black Thunder ain't a killer. I've seen all kinds and I'll stake my years of learnin' about 'em on what I'm tellin' yuh now. He ain't a killer!"

They nod in a satisfied way. But when I leave to turn in that night, I can notice that Rance has one of them frowns on his face. He don't seem to be so sure. And I guess it's because Holden has shown while with us that he knows something about horseflesh, too.

A week later, I get orders one morning from Rance, just before he goes to town, to have the stallion taken out to a distant pasture so he can graze with a herd of horses. I give the order to Holden and ride out with three of the boys to inspect a couple of colts that are sick on another part of the range.

A few hours later we're heading back, when I see a twist of dust jump over a rise and a horseman pounding towards us. I see it's

young Lewis, another of the hands. He pulls up in a bunch-footed skidding stop, points excitedly back the way he came, while his mouth opens twice before he can finally get the words out.

"Pour in the steel, Buck," he blurts at last, "and sashay back to the house as fast as yuh can. Frank Elton's been killed! They've sent for Rance and Jim to come in from town."

"Frank killed!" I cry out. "Are you loco?"

"No, I ain't, Buck! I seen him carried in."

I CAN see now that young Lewis is plumb serious. So I take a grip on the reins and my paint is pouring the wind out behind us as I head along the road that worms through the Elton acres. I hit the ground by the veranda, while the pinto is still running.

Taking the steps three at a time, I bust into the living room. Frank is on a couch and around him is Rance, Jim, Holden, and a few of the wranglers. There's no doubt, when I look at him, that Frank is dead.

"How did it happen?" I ask Rance.

He turns a sad, haggard face towards me, but there's a hard glint in his eyes.

"The stallion done it, Buck," he says. "The one yuh was so shore wasn't a killer."

He stares at me for seconds, then turns his glance toward his dead brother.

"Holden brought Frank in," he goes on.

"Holden brought him in?" I ask, somewhat puzzled.

"That's right, Buck. When yuh told him to take the stallion out to that herd, he remembered there was half a mile of wire that needed replacin'. He asked Frank to ride out with him and look it over. You know Frank always made it a habit to give his judgment on things like that, and he goes out with Holden. Frank wasn't worried about danger as long as you thought Black Thunder was all right.

"Half-way there, a tumbleweed scared the hoss and he went wild. Holden couldn't handle him. He all of a sudden went for Frank's hoss. Frank tried to get him out of the way, but the stallion broke the halter and ran into the mustang and knocked him aside. Frank was pitched out of the saddle and the scared mustang ran off. Before either Frank or Dave could move, Black Thunder was on Frank with his hoofs and one good kick crushed in Frank's chest. Then the stallion galloped away. It all happened so quick, Holden was helpless."

Rance stabs me with accusing eyes again and adds:

"If I had listened to Dave, I guess Frank would be alive now."

I knew what Rance meant and I felt pretty bad about it. But there was still one thing on which I'd stake my life—Black Thunder was not a killer.

Jim has gone to send for the coroner and

[Turn page]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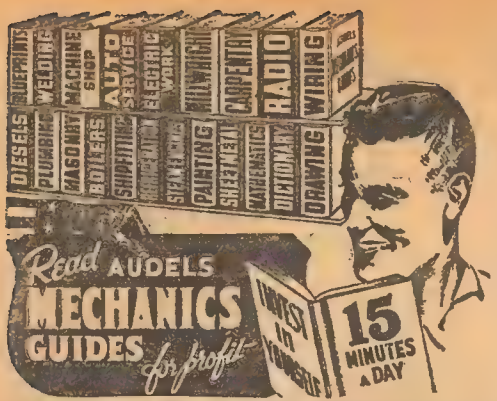


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Holden is talking with Rance. So I turn and walk on out of the house and down to the stallion's special corral. I lean on the top pole and build myself a smoke. They blame me for Frank's death, that's certain, and the thought weighs me down. Yet I am sure I've read the stallion right. He don't seem to me to have any bad traits.

In the corral I can see the broad hoof-marks made by the stallion. Then a thought comes to me. I take a tie-string and knife from my pocket and go into the corral. A few minutes later I am satisfied, and walk back to the house.

That night I don't eat with Rance and Jim, their attitude toward me having grown kind of cold. Rance won't fire me, but I know that the only thing to do is to leave the place, as long as they think I'm to blame for Frank's death.

The next day I go about my business as usual. Buckboards and horses are in front of the Elton house, as people come from all over to pay their last respects to Frank. It is nearly one o'clock of the next morning when the last visitor leaves and Rance and Jim go to bed. . . .

Only once in a while Rance does talk to me, but only to give an order about some work or to ask me to do something in the house.

I sleep in a room on the ground floor in the rear of the ranchhouse and I lay in bed fully dressed with just my shoes off until three-thirty. Then I get up and go out of the room as silent as a panther and into the living room where Frank is laid out. One dim light burns, but it is all the light I need for what I want to do.

I open Frank's coat, and get a chill as I touch his cold hands. Then I open his shirt wide and see what I am looking for. On his chest, against the whiteness of the skin, are some bruises. One of them stands out in stark relief. The blackish ring made by a horse's shoe. Soon fixing things as they had been, I skulk back to my room, my mind whirling with thoughts.

At dawn I hear Rance come downstairs and call out some orders to the boys. Jim hasn't shown up yet, for which I am glad, 'cause I want to talk to Rance alone and tell him a few things I have in mind. When I walk into the kitchen, he don't notice me, but just sits and stares out the window until I arouse him by saying:

"Rance, there's somethin' I got to talk to yuh about."

"Talk," says he.

"I'd rather yuh'd come outside with me where nobody can hear us," I answer.

He drums his fingers impatiently on the table and finally says:

"All right. Come on."

We go out under a big cottonwood and he asks:

"What is it, Brenner?"

I come right out then with the things I'm

thinking and after I'm through he questions me. Finally, I have him convinced.

"I took yore word and experience for a lot around here, Buck," he says, as he leaves me, "until yuh failed me in yore judgment of that hoss, but if things go the way yuh figger they will, I'll admit I'm a fool and did wrong in lettin' my faith in yuh slip."

THAT afternoon Frank is buried and it's after supper that night when Rance calls Jim and Holden into the living room. I'm with Rance.

"Tell him, Buck," says he.

"I told yuh that stallion ain't a killer and I still mean it, boys," I say to Jim and Holden. "But I'm goin' to point out who did kill Frank. He wasn't killed accidental-like. He was murdered!"

When I say this, Jim gets a surprised look on his face and Holden's mouth sags open while he licks his lips.

"More of yore talk, hey, Brenner?" he says finally. "Yuh mebbe have proof of this wild talk yuh're spoutin'?"

"Yes, I have proof," I answer, "and tomorrow I'll show you boys the murderer."

"Why not now?" snaps Jim.

"I have my reasons," I say, "and tomorrow will be the day."

Holden sneers in disbelief.

Rance says he was going to turn in as he didn't sleep much the last few nights, and goes over to his room. Jim and Holden stroll outside. I go into my room and just sit there watching the hours go by.

Two o'clock passes and I am beginning to get drowsy when I hear a slight noise at the door. The knob is turning. The door is opening slowly and I can see a dark form slinking into the room half crouched and with the light-footedness of an Indian. The form springs towards the bed and I hear the thud of something thumped into the blankets I had fixed up like a sleeping man. I shiver as I rise up like a shadow from the corner where I have been quietly waiting. I reach out and pull the black cover off the lighted lantern I have ready.

The man by the bed whirls with a curse, snatches a gun from holster and fires. But I thumb the trigger of the Colt I am holding, first, and the slug rips into his chest, knocks him backward against the wall, where his knees cave and he crashes to the floor. Footsteps come pounding down the hall, and Rance Elton dashes into the room.

"Did yuh get him?" Rance asks, waving a shotgun.

"There's yore man, Rance," I say grimly. "There's the rotten lobo of a killer."

I walk over and, reaching down, rip the six-gun from the hand of Dave Holden.

"It all come out like you said, Buck," says Rance, still a bit unbelieving.

"It couldn't be any other way," I answer,

[Turn page]

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"especially when he thought I knew who he was."

Holden is trying to push himself to a sitting position and finally manages it, coughing rackingly. His face is white and a look of fear is on it.

"Am I goin' to die?" he mumbles.

"Mebbe yuh are, Dave," I says. "Why don't yuh come clean with the reason behind what yuh done?"

"It wasn't me," he blurts, breathing hard. "I won't go without the right one gets paid for—"

Out of the corner of my eye I see the movement by the window, even as the room is filled with the sound of a shot and the moans of Holden as a slug hits him.

Still holding my Colt, I snap it up and thumb the hammer. From outside the window a loud, wailing cry comes, and two hands suddenly grip at the sill. I rush over and, reaching far outside, grab onto a pair of arms and heave back. A body drags through the window and falls in a loose heap at my feet. I turns it over and the hate-filled eyes and face of Jim Elton looks up at me, as he puts both hands to his neck that is streaming blood.

"Broken collar-bone," I say. Then I turn again to Holden. "He tried to do yuh, Dave, tried to stop yuh from sayin' somethin', I guess. Are yuh goin' to come clean now?"

"The dirty, doublecrossin' sidewinder!" Holden gasps over and over again. Then he nods. "I'll come clean, all right."

Jim Elton says nothing, and sets his lips as pain gnaws at him.

"That skunk, Jim Elton, hired me," Holden goes on. "Told me to get a job here. I'm an owlhooter from up Montana way and I got to know him through buckin' roulette at his place. I owed him dough and when I got full one time I talked too much. Told him I was wanted. He offered me five thousand dollars if I killed Rance and Frank. The will his uncle left says that when Frank dies, Rance gets the place and, after him, Jim.

"This lobo wanted it right away, so's he could sell it, take the money and open a big gambling place in the East. He hates yuh all. I took the job 'cause one killin' or another was nothin' to me. That's my business, for a price. Rance was to be done away with next. I got the idea when I saw the stallion, figgerin' I could put the blame on Black Thunder that way, and tried to make you think he was a killer without anybody findin' out. When yuh said yuh knew who the real killer was, Buck, we decided to put yuh out of the way."

"I figgered yuh would, Holden," I tell him.

Then I turn and walk over to Rance, who is staring down at the weapon Dave used, and which I have brought to my room. I'd found it out near where Jim was killed. Dave has hid it till he can get rid of it. It is a twelve-pound sledge-hammer. On the side of it two holes are bored. Bolts go through

these and through a horseshoe that they hold tight against it.

"That's what killed Frank," I say. "The sledge gave the thing enough weight to crush. Is that right, Holden?"

He nods. "I carried it in a blanket-roll and took him by surprise," he says. "But how did you know?"

"I knew it was murder," I tell him, "because I measured the hoofprints of the stallion and compared 'em with the mark on Frank's body when he was in his coffin. The stallion's hoofprints are about a half-inch bigger all around. Somethin' yuh overlooked, Holden, when yuh made yore murder weapon. And now, Rance, I guess we'll call in the sawbones and the Law."

## CHEYENNE DEATH TRAP

(Concluded from page 68)

"Yuh're not the only one who knows somethin' about drugs, Dekker," Paige told him coolly. "I've had quite a few talks with Doc Miltner in town about the stuff that most folks hereabouts call deadly night shade. If yuh know that belladonna slows up the heart, makes a person tired-like, yuh oughta know that strychnine acts just the opposite. It stimulates the heart, makes it run faster. And spirits of ammonia is good for clearin' the head."

Dekker's eyes blazed. His thin lips drew back against his teeth.

"That fight in the room when yuh knocked over the lamp," he said. "Yuh planned it to hide what yuh was doin'."

"Shore. The table went over and the bottle of strychnine tablets busted open. But I found one tablet and downed it with a swallow of spirits of ammonia. That was enough to offset the effects of the belladonna."

"Alamo," said Brian, "what about the dinero that was stole from yore mochilas?"

"I reckon we'll find it right on Dekker," Paige said, and hunkered down to search through the outlaw leader's clothing.

In a special money-belt inside Dekker's shirt Paige found the stolen five thousand dollars.

"Here it is," Paige said. "Looks like the Pony Express will get new hosses in spite of Dekker and his friends." Paige turned to Dekker who was still sprawled on the floor. "Yuh was right about one thing, Dekker. Yuh said there was goin' to be Boot Hill bait in Cheyenne tonight. Well, you're it!"

NEXT ISSUE

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## TRAIL BLAZERS

*(Continued from page 10)*

of individual prospectors pecked away at their own gold claims.

These latter, many of whom turned to prospecting for and mining needed strategic metals during recent years, will in all likelihood go back to trying for gold once the war is won and the emergency regulations revoked.

Flagstaff, Williams and McNary are Arizona's lumber towns, the center of the State's most important sawmill operations. The timber is found at elevations ranging from five to eleven thousand feet and Arizona's eight National Forests, nearly twelve million acres of them, contain the bulk of the timber left in the State.

### Cattle Country

Cattle? You bet Arizona is still famous cattle country. It has been ever since pioneer American cattlemen began to drift herds in, mostly from Texas shortly after the Civil War. Nearly eighty percent of the country is able to produce natural pastureage, and the climate is generally mild enough to eliminate winter feeding. That makes for an economical setup.

However desert or semi-arid forage is pretty lean fare on which to attempt to fatten "shipping" beef that will measure up to modern standards. Consequently Arizona ranges are likely to be "breeding" ranges.

Little finished beef is marketed direct from the range. Instead the annual increase, the fresh crop of yearlings is usually driven or shipped to farm pastures or feeding lots in the irrigated farm sections of the Salt River and Yuma Valleys for finishing off—that is fattening before sending them to their final market.

Alfalfa is the standard grass feed of the Arizona farmer. In fact Arizona alfalfa is famous. Baled alfalfa hay from the Salt River Valley has been shipped and sold clear out in New York State.

In Arizona today, as in most of the West, regardless of pioneer conditions and old rivalries, cattlemen, that is cattle raisers and farmers (feed raisers), work pretty closely together. They are often dependent to a considerable extent on each other.

Aside from feed, grass and alfalfa hay, cotton has long been one of the Arizona farmer's primary cash crops. But winter garden truck, carrots, cauliflower, beets and so forth as well as fall and spring lettuce have become increasingly important during recent years. So has the State's citrus fruit industry—and its cantaloups.

Dates are grown in Yuma and Maricopa counties.

Some apples and peaches are raised in scattered sections in the mountain valleys where the climate is suitable.

### The State's Bound to Grow

In spite of all this there is a whale of a lot of "empty" land in Arizona. Only about one percent of the State's acreage is cultivated. How come this is so, if the soil is so rich and the sun so bright?

The answer is water. Or rather lack of it. Arizona farms if they had to depend on rainfall would be dry and lean indeed. Agriculture in Arizona virtually always means irrigation whether the water comes from impounded streams, reservoirs or deep driven wells.

How much more Arizona land can eventually be turned into productive growing acres is literally dependent on future development and utilization of the available water supply. Remember that, if you are planning on a postwar farm opportunity in that glamorous and fascinating section of the Southwest.

Against this can be balanced these equally true observations. Crop failures are almost unknown to the Arizona irrigation farmer, and his per acre yield is likely to be high and above usual average both in quantity and value of the crop produced.

Yep, Arizona, the Saguaro Cactus State, is bound to grow when the war is over. And to grow a lot of things beside cactus.

See you again next issue. Until then your friend and well-wisher,

—CAPTAIN RANGER.

## OUR NEXT ISSUE

WE ARE featuring a new and different type of novel in the next issue of EXCITING WESTERN. It is DUDE WRANGLER, by William Polk, and it is an unusually dramatic action yarn in a modern Western setting.

Tom Glenning seems like just an ordinary

[*Turn page*]


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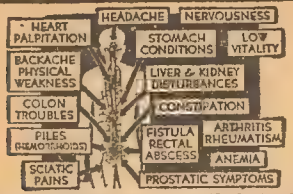


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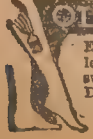

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trol of the whole situation and the way in which he does so makes NOT BY A DAM SITE a yarn to enjoy and remember!

Once again Alamo Paige rides the range in THE PONY EXPRESS PAYS OFF, an exciting novelet by Reeve Walker in the next issue of EXCITING WESTERN.

Alamo Paige has one of the greatest missions of his career for he has been selected to carry Alexander Major's fortune in unset diamonds on a daring ride that is filled with peril. If Paige does not get through safely it will mean the ruin of the Pony Express Company, and there are dangerous killers waiting for him all along the trail.

With Mel Baugh, another pony express rider, Alamo plans to outwit the men whom he knows are waiting to steal the diamonds. Baugh is to try to get through while driving a stage coach, while Paige makes the journey in the saddle of a fast horse.

Things do not work out quite as the pony express riders expect and Alamo Paige finds that he has to fight his way through against great odds. THE PONY EXPRESS PAYS OFF is packed with action and suspense.

There will also be a number of swiftly paced shorter Western stories in the next issue, and Captain Ranger will be on hand with another TRAIL BLAZERS department. THE COWBOY HAD A WORD FOR IT, our special series by Chuck Stanley, which has been omitted from this issue, will reappear in the next number.

We are always eager to learn which stories have appealed to you most. Write and tell us your opinions. We'll be glad to hear from you. Please address all letters and postcards to

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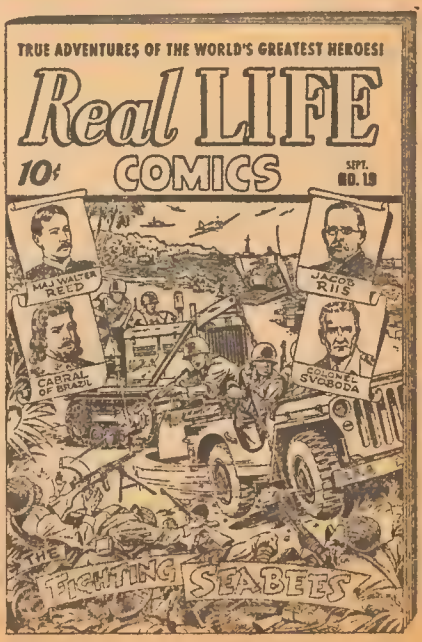


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The Editor, EXCITING WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Here's a reader who has some interesting things to say about the magazine:

I'm an EXCITING WESTERN fan and proud of it. I like the stories about Alamo Paige and Navajo Raine just fine. I also think the other stories in the magazine are swell. I just finished reading the August issue and I liked CHILKOOT TRAIL, by John A. Thompson, and LAW HITS THE BIG MUDDY, by Scott Carleton, the best—for they were different. The first was about the Northland and the second about the river boats. Of course I liked the stories about Alamo and Navajo, too. Keep up the good work.—*Johnny Wilson, Chicago, Ill.*

Thanks for your letter, Johnny. Glad that you were so well pleased with the stories in the August issue. We'll try to keep right on pleasing you.

Here's a letter that sounded a bit mysterious when we first read it—but when we finished we knew just what the writer meant:

Sometimes I like the Navajo Raine stories—and sometimes I feel they could be better—but I'm waiting. Usually I like Alamo Paige—but there are times when I'm not wild about those Pony Express yarns—but now that I've finished reading the August issue—I'm just waiting. You see you announced GUN THUNDER IN BROKEN BOW, by W. C. Tuttle, would be in the next issue—and he has always been one of my favorite authors—so I'm waiting.—*John Marshall, Boston, Mass.*

And as you read this letter you probably have stopped waiting, John. For the W. C. Tuttle novel is in this issue of EXCITING WESTERN and we are sure you haven't been disappointed. Thanks for your letter. Happy reading, everybody.

—THE EDITOR.

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